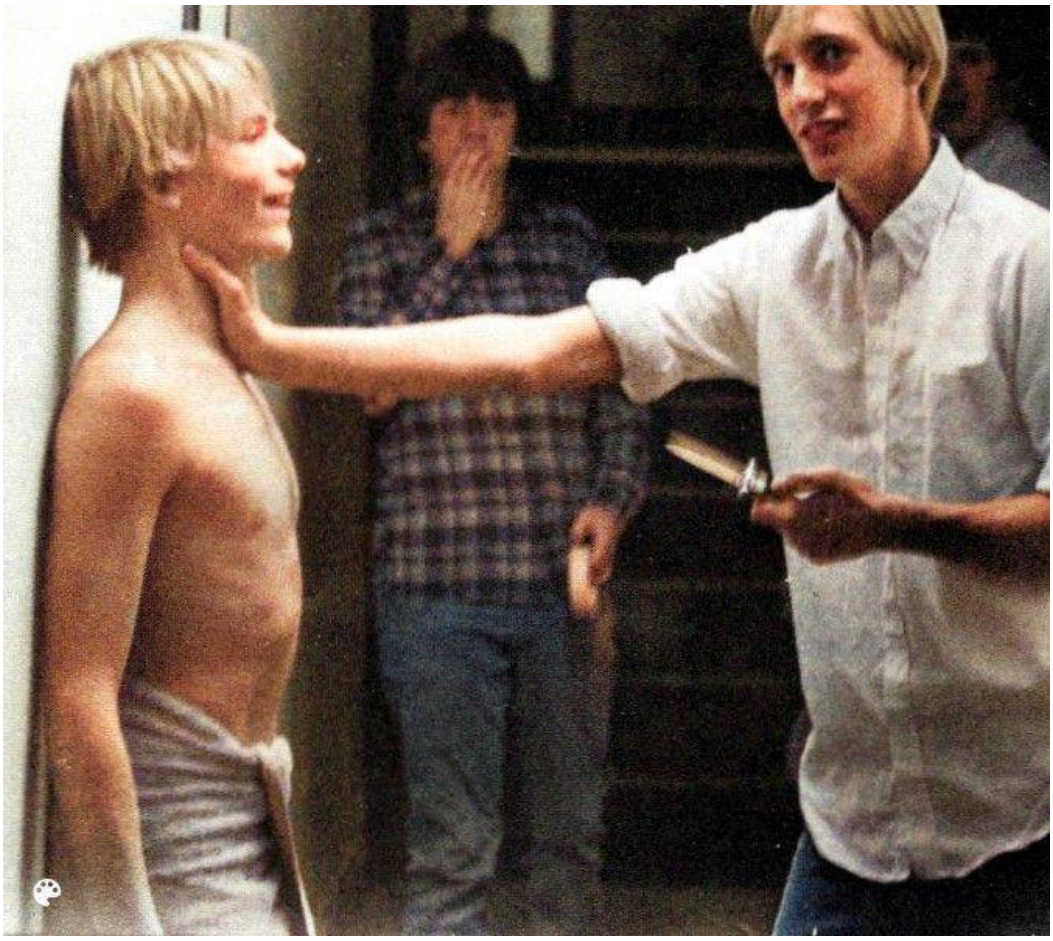
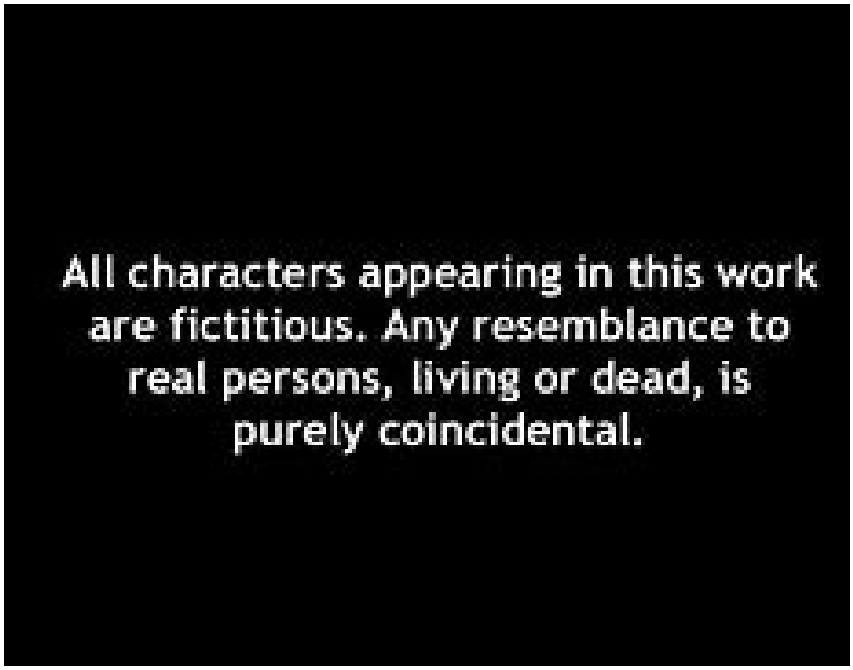
THE BEATING OF ROGER TAFT

A PALEAN PACKARD MYSTERY

BY BOB FOREMAN




All characters appearing in this work
are fictitious. Any resemblance to
real persons, living or dead, is
purely coincidental.

© 2022, 2025

THE KEY CLUB BOYS

A Palean Packard Adventure

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.	THE TRAGEDY AT EASTMAN	5
CHAPTER II.	ANOTHER MYSTERY	9
CHAPTER III.	MISSING WORDS	15
CHAPTER IV.	AT THE ORPHANAGE	19
CHAPTER V.	THE ORIGINS OF CHRIS KING	24
CHAPTER VI.	AT THE AWARDS BANQUET	27
CHAPTER VII.	TAMPA	31
CHAPTER VIII.	MEETING THE TWINS	36
CHAPTER IX.	WHAT THE TWINS KNEW	42
CHAPTER X.	THE MAGIC SHOW	48
CHAPTER XI.	AT THE RADIO STATION	53
CHAPTER XII.	FIRE, DETOUR AND STOWAWAYS	60
CHAPTER XIII.	NEARER MY GOD TO THEE	67
CHAPTER XIV.	THE KOKOMO PARADISE	74
CHAPTER XV.	THE SECRET APARTMENT	78
CHAPTER XVI.	MEETING THE STAGE CREW	83
CHAPTER XVII.	STRANGE SCENERY	91
CHAPTER XVIII.	THE FALL	95
CHAPTER XIX.	ROGER TAFT	98
CHAPTER XX.	THREE DAYS LATER	103

CHAPTER I. THE TRAGEDY AT EASTMAN

"I'm a savage in the morning before I've had my coffee!" loudly exclaimed Palean Packard, as he surprised his best pal Chris King from behind, lifting him high off his feet and swinging him around three times, before hurling him down onto the soft grass of the Eastman Kodak soccer field. Both boys were fifteen and lived at the Kodak Boys Orphanage in Rochester, New York, and that is where they were conducting soccer practice.

"Jesus H. Christ, Palean! You ripped all the laces off my jersey!" cried the disheveled Chris King, picking himself up and laughing.

"Hands off, dude!" giggled Palean as he dodged a counterattack from his best pal. "I have an appointment to see Mr. Eastman in half an hour, and I must look my best!"

Palean Packard was slim and solid, of medium height, and he radiated remarkable beauty and health. These attributes, along with his laughing blue eyes, shaggy blonde hair which was always in his eyes, and the slight southern accent of a Gentleman, had earned him the captaincy of the Kodak Boy Orphans soccer team, whose green uniform he proudly wore.

Chris King possessed a shock of bright ginger hair, sparkling green eyes and freckles, and he spoke with a gentle Boston Irish accent. He was slightly taller than Palean and a lit cigarette nearly always dangled from his lips. Both boys were endowed with a special beauty, almost equally attractive when viewed from the rear, that swooned the girls at nearby Earhart Cooking School for Girls, and Palean had dimples to boot.

"If you read the news this morning, Mister Laze E. Bones, you'd know why he wants to see you," grinned Chris King as he displayed the morning paper for Palean to see. "Huge Fat Girls Fall on Mr. Eastman's Desk then Vanish!" read the headline.

"Is that today's paper?" asked Palean

"Read the date, buddy-- June 26, 1927," replied Chris King.

"Holy Cow! What happened?"

"All the paper says," explained Chris King, "is that three fat girls crashed through the floor of the filming studio above his office, crushed his desk, then vanished without a trace. They would have fallen on Mr. Eastman except that he was breakfasting himself at the sumptuous buffet in his office."

"Then what happened?" asked Palean, rocked by the sudden news.

"All the food and coffee at the buffet was covered with dust and had to be replaced."

"I don’t mean the food, you moron! Was Mr. Eastman hurt? Was my foster father Mr. Eastman hurt?" implored Palean.

"No," replied Chris King. "He had stepped away from his desk to enjoy the buffet when *KA-BOOM!* the ceiling fourteen feet above his desk was torn to shreds by the massive weight of the girls."

"Whew! That's a relief!" exclaimed Palean, wiping his brow.

"He has engaged a tenured professor from Cleveland to investigate, the well-known Professor Zimmer."

"But what does that have to do with me?" asked Palean.

"That's what I'd like to know," replied his best pal.

Meanwhile at that very moment in the nearby main building, the great inventor and industrialist George Eastman welcomed Professor Zimmer into his offices, rising from his huge carved replacement mahogany desk. The professor was on the tall side with dark hair and a fair complexion.

"Have a seat, professor!" greeted Mr. Eastman who stood to shake hands with his guest. Lighting a cigarette and exhaling, he said, "Welcome to Kodak." Mr. Eastman sat, but the professor was still awestruck by the room, and he whirled about as he spoke.

"Why this office occupies an entire floor, with windows all around!" he coughed.

"Well, here at Eastman," chuckled Mr. Eastman, "we like things photogenic, don't you know. Sit down, sit down!" The professor sat.

"Will you have a cigarette for your cough?" asked Mr. Eastman. "Have you had your breakfast? How about some coffee?"

"No, thank you, sir, I don’t smoke and I've just eaten at the Beauty Rest Hotel where I am staying."

"Well, I insist you take a Coca-Cola, it's just what the doctor ordered. I'll buzz my secretary." Mr. Eastman depressed one of the many buttons on his desk telephone box and a slender and fair-skinned older girl entered through a silent and hitherto concealed door.

"Yes, Mr. Eastman?" she asked as the man looked up.

"Why, where is my secretary of thirty-seven years, Miss Whitney?" Mr. Eastman demanded.

"She had to rush out, sir, you see, Miss Whitney's a dear old friend of mine sir and I stopped by to visit, then she had this emergency, sir and there I was, so..." babbled the breathless Miss Fortune.

"But *why* did she rush out?" asked the great man, rising from his seat in a high state of nerves.

"She received an urgent telegram, Mr. Eastman, and that's all I know. Now, may *I* be of service?" she smiled.

"Say your name, please. I didn't catch your name."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she laughed. "It's Lucinda Swift Fortune."

"Well, Miss Fortune, thank you for saving the day! Fetch the professor a Coke, Miss Fortune, lots of ice," he ordered, sitting down again and pointing to the professor with his cigarette. "And don't give him just one napkin."

Miss Fortune walked the ten feet over to the sideboard and brought back a Coke, with coaster and napkins, and took her exit. The professor took a hearty swig of the South's sweet soda and almost jumped out of his chair.

"Jumping Jehosophat! That packs a wallop!" He banged his head with his hand repeatedly.

"Ha ha ha ha ha," laughed the great inventor. "You weren't ready for the cocaine, were you boy? Asa Candler just put it back in, and why he ever took it out to begin with is a mystery to me. Three a day is my limit, although the servants adore them. The increased productivity is astounding."

Suddenly fueled and recalling the purpose of his visit, the professor stammered, "Can you please fill me in on the details of yesterday's tragedy?"

"Of course, of course, professor, but first things first. I want you to meet my adopted son."

Right on cue, a buzzer sounded and the tinny disembodied voice of Miss Fortune announced, "A Palean Packard is here to see you, sir."

"By Jingo, it's Palean!" beamed Mr. George Eastman. "Bring him in by all means!" he spoke into the intercom.

The concealed door opened but instead of Palean, a beanied young schoolboy of good looks flew into the room uninvited, closely followed by Miss Fortune and Master Palean Packard, who was holding in his arms a cat.

"Roger Taft, you halt right there!" exclaimed Miss Fortune as she raced forward to grab the errant boy and stop him in his tracks.

CHAPTER II. ANOTHER MYSTERY

"And who the blazes is this?" demanded George Eastman in a gruff voice and once again rising from his chair.

"Out!" Miss Fortune ordered the boy, and with a gleeful grimace exposing the braces on his teeth, Roger Taft ran out and was gone as suddenly as he had appeared.

"That's my son, oh please forgive me, Mr. Eastman," begged Miss Fortune breathlessly. "He just this second arrived back in town from boarding school in Connecticut and he has nowhere else to go until I finish here today. Oh, please forgive me, sir..."

"Well there was no harm done, and you *are* doing me a great favor, Miss Fortune," said Mr. Eastman to the troubled stenographer.

"I will never bring him to the office again, sir," finished Miss Fortune as she closed the secret door behind her.

Palean, who had witnessed this extraordinary scene had a queer look on his face and was lost in thought as he lit a cigarette.

"Palean, snap out of it!" commanded George Eastman.

"Thank goodness you are unharmed, sir!" said Palean as he rushed to the great inventor, making eye contact as he shook hands in his simple, strong and direct way. "But just look at your poor old desk!" he said, pointing to the ruins which had been preserved for inspection. "That was a close shave!"

"Never mind that and say hello to Professor Zimmer," replied Mr. Eastman, smiling.

"Greetings Professor, I am Palean Packard the third. I sure hope you can get to the bottom of our friggin' myst'ry!" he exclaimed to the professor who had never seen normal American boys let off their leash.

"Watch your language, boy! Guest, you know," barked Mr. Eastman with a twinkle in his eye as he scolded the orphan.

"This is my cat, Dean Martineau," he informed the professor.

"What an unusual name, Palean," commented the professor, pronouncing the name "Pa-le-an" in a learned fashion. Palean released Dean Martineau to roam and eagerly pumped the hand of the professor.

"Dean Martineau? Isn't it! I'm starving!" exclaimed the boy as he made a beeline for the buffet. When he returned to the professor, it was with a full plate of kippers and a hot cup of coffee.

"Tell him how you got it, son," commanded Mr. Eastman, as Palean breakfasted himself.

"Got what?" asked Palean, his mouth almost full. "The kippers, the cat, or the coffee?"

A bit impatiently the professor rasped, "How did you get the name Palean?"

"Stop being so sarcastic, Palean!" laughed Mr. Eastman.

"Jeez, I'm sorry, sir, I have something on my mind and I can't quite figure out what... anyways, if you want to blame someone, blame Chris King, he's excellent at being sarcastic. In fact of the two of us, I think he's the more sarcastic."

"Palean, the professor is waiting."

"Well, Professor," Palean began, looking the professor straight in the eye, "fifteen years ago about when I was born, I was left off at the Rochester Boys Orphans Home. But not left in a basket at the doorstep, but in a brand new Packard convertible, still running to keep me warm."

Palean became more excited as his story progressed. "There was a tag pinned on me that said 'Episcopalian' but because it was a dark and stormy night, only 'palian' could be seen, and they thought it was my name. So they named me Palean for the tag and Packard for the car, and the third because I have so much money."

"He receives a trust account payment of $100,000 a year in monthly installments and has every month since his birth-- anonymously," noted Mr. Eastman.

"At first I was nervous about being a foundling and all alone in the world, but Mr. Eastman very kindly built a replica of the Rochester town orphanage named the Kodak Boys Orphanage and adopted all the other boys to move there! So I still live in an orphanage with all my pals, but there's far less crying at night."

"Fascinating! And what is your role with the orphanage, Mister Eastman?" asked the professor.

"Oh, I guess you might call me 'the trouble-shooter.' I just try to keep everything moving smoothly along its pre-ordained path."

All of a sudden, there was a loud thump and the sound of a lot of glass breaking.

"A soccer ball has crashed through the French windows!" exclaimed the professor.

Chris King picked up his ball, dusted off the glass shards which did not appear to harm him, and moved toward Palean.

"Professor, the culprit is Chris King," announced George Eastman, as the boy shook hands with the academician.

Palean offered the exposition: "Chris King was a star performer in vaudeville before he was taken away from his father and put up for adoption by the Geary Society, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, mainly those in show business."

"I started at the age of five in a family act with my dad," said Chris King, "but then when I was six I was kidnapped by a Mr. Nice, and he hypnotized me so I don't recall who or where my father is. Then Mr. Nice sold me into white slavery--"

There was a gasp of disbelief from the professor, although the idea of Chris King in white slavery did appeal to some.

"Oh, not that white slavery, the melodrama, *White Slavery* in which I played Buster Brown for three seasons and never received a bad review. Until I was nine when, like a ripe peach, I was plucked from the stage by the Geary people."

"They say Chris King put the 'devil' in vaudeville!" added Palean affectionately.

"YOU were Buster Brown?" asked the professor, greatly impressed. "I saw your act in Cleveland!"

Chris King bowed politely and said with exaggerated company manners, "Excuse me, Per'fessor and Mr. Eastman for busting up your doors," he said, pointing at the broken window. "Palean will be pleased to pay for any damages," flashing a smile at his best pal who ignored the jibe and faced off with Chris King.

"I see you are wearing a new jersey, Chris King. Hey! New... jersey, get it? New Jersey! God, I'm funny!" he laughed maniacally.

"Food! Am I famished!" spouted Chris King who pushed Palean out of his path and headed from the buffet where began to prepare for himself an ample Irish breakfast, his second breakfast of the day, if truth be told. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day," he explained to the professor.

Mr. Eastman spoke into his telephone, "Miss Fortune, please send the second unit construction crew over to repair the west window in my office damaged by an errant soccer ball," he said and hung up.

"Now that we are all here, let me tell you what I know of yesterday's queer occurrence," continued the great inventor. "There were no witnesses, but from what the authorities can piece together, the three Mann sisters, Aragon, Trianon, and Katamite had arrived at the color film studio above my office to rehearse."

"What time was this, sir?" asked the professor.

"In the middle of the forenoon," he replied. "You may have seen them or heard them on the radio, the popular Mann Act. Each sister weighs three-hundred and fifty pounds."

"Sure I know their act, together they weigh over half a ton. Man, can they throw it around!" exclaimed Chris King.

"No one was in the studio," said Mr. Eastman, "but luckily a transcription machine was running at the time and we have a sound recording of what transpired." He pressed another button on his desk and voices filled the room, as if by magic.

"Who are you?" demanded a strident female voice. "Do as I say, or you will find yourself at the receiving end of my terrifying horse whip!" replied the voice of a boy, accompanied by the *CRACK!* of a whip.

The boy's voice continued, "You three stand right over there on those marks and skip rope! Now!" The horse whip cracked again, and after a second the sound of loud steady thuds could be heard. "Count it!" demanded the voice of the boy.

Three manly voices replied in unison, "One," (crack, scream, thud) "two," (crack, scream, thud) "three..." and then there was a tremendous crash, a prolonged scream, and there the recording ended.

"When I heard the ceiling crack open," said Mr. Eastman, "I turned around from the buffet and through the thick haze of dust caught a glimpse of three gargantuan figures crashing onto my desk. But when the air cleared, there was not a trace of the girls, and all that was left was this."

Mr. Eastman produced from a pile of tattered tweed costumes, shredded to pieces by the deadly sharp stings of a horse whip.

"You mean there are three naked fat girls running around loose?" asked the stunned Palean.

"That's a menace to civilization as we know it!" cried Chris King.

"But that's not all. There was this miniature horse whip," said Mr. Eastman.

"Why, that's a boy's toy horse whip!" exclaimed Palean.

"It's yours, Palean," said Mr. Eastman. "Read the inscription on the handle."

Palean took the horse whip and read, "Be true to your school."

"No, read the other side."

"'Compliments of the Packard Motor Car Company,'" read Palean, suddenly realizing his plight.

"In an effort to locate the Mann girls," said Mr. Eastman, "the authorities notified mother Mann who confided that her daughters were terrified of horse whips-- of any length."

"Where did you last see your horse whip, Palean?" asked Professor Zimmer accusingly.

"In the glove compartment of my Packard," gulped Palean.

"Aha! And when was that?"

"Gee, maybe ten years ago. I went looking for my mittens..."

"You mean you haven't driven your Packard in ten years?" asked the professor.

"I've never driven the Packard or anything but my pony. Do you need a horse whip to drive a car?" The professor was dumbfounded by the innocence of the boy.

"Where were you when all this happened?" asked Professor Zimmer.

"In the middle of the forenoon? Playing soccer," replied Palean.

"Can anyone substantiate your alibi?"

"My alibi? Well, Chris King was with me, he nearly always is," pointing to his best pal who was still piling up food at the buffet.

"Anyone else?"

"The whole soccer team!" exclaimed Chris King angrily. "Look here, Per'fessor or whatever you name is, are you accusing my friend Palean of trying to harm his foster father?"

"Calm down boy, he's merely trying to get the facts straight," said Mr. Eastman sternly. "It's clear that someone is trying to frame Palean for a crime he knew nothing about. Someone stole the horse whip from his Packard car."

"Where is the Packard?" asked the tenured professor from Cleveland.

"Right out front of Kodak orphanage," explained Palean. "You see, my Packard came with a trust fund too, an endowment in perpetual motion, and Mr. Eastman kept it as a shrine.

"Look out this window and you can see it up there on Orphanage Hill. It's a green 1912 seven passenger touring car." Palean led the professor over to the windows at the far end of the room which faced the hill, and Mr. Eastman followed. "Look past the soccer field, past the stables, there! There's the auto and the Kodak Orphanage through the window, see?" asked Palean, pointing with his cigarette.

While Mr. Eastman and his guests were engaged in this conversation and Chris King in food selection, unbeknownst to them, more skullduggery was afoot.

As swiftly and silently as the cat, Miss Fortune and her son Roger Taft entered unseen through the secret door and from a diabolic device held in her hand, she directed a fine mist of spray about the head of Chris King, instantly rendering the orphan unconscious.

At the very same instant, Roger Taft, getting down on his hands and knees, positioned himself for a "Bavarian Pushover" so that with a shove from Miss Fortune, the limp body of Chris King fell backwards over Roger Taft and landed on the carpet face up, his head hitting the carpet with a thud, unheard by the others.

Roger Taft, with an evil smile on his face, stood above, and for an instant, stared down at the helpless lad, his arms splayed above his head. Then with all the force he could muster, Roger Taft slammed his shoe into the chest of Chris King, and in a blur of movement, his hands reached down to the boy's neck. As his mother signaled him frantically, Roger Taft sprinted from the room, closing the door behind him.

"Chris King is dead!" screamed Miss Fortune.

CHAPTER III. MISSING WORDS

"The boy has only fainted," cried Mr. Eastman with great relief, after a groggy and bewildered Chris King sat up and stared at the concerned persons who surrounded him. "What kicked me?" he asked, putting his hand to his head. Everyone spoke at once.

"No one kicked you," laughed Mr. George Eastman. "You fainted, boy."

"Frigging whew!" uttered Palean with an exaggerated dramatic gesture.

"That's a relief," said the professor.

"He must have fainted from lack of food!" suggested Miss Fortune, concealing her true astonishment that the boy was unharmed.

"He said he was famished," agreed the professor.

"Well, he's always famished, but he doesn't faint before every meal," corrected Palean. "Even for a redhead, he's pretty normal."

"Do you need Nurse Valentine, boy?" asked the kindly inventor.

"Please, no sir," answered Chris King, embarrassed by all the attention. "Actually, sir" he continued as Palean helped him to his feet, "I just want to eat."

Plunking his lanky figure down at Mr. Eastman's desk, Chris King was served a new and ample breakfast, which he began to devour immediately. "Delicious" he purred and rubbed his tummy.

"You may go, Miss Fortune," commanded Mr. Eastman. "And thank goodness you were here and at the ready. You've been our savior twice today!"

She departed, wearing a false smile.

"Now, where were we?" asked Mr. Eastman, greatly relieved that Chris King was out of the woods. "Oh yes, the Packard car. It seems obvious that the boy we heard on the recording stole the horse whip and is trying to frame Palean."

"Sabotage was at work here!" spouted the professor.

"What is sabotage?" asked Palean.

"Tut-tut-tut," clicked Mister Eastman. "Palean..."

"Aw, jeez, I'm sorry, sir, I got so worked up over the whip and Chris King I forgot. Please, sir, flip me a nickel!" he asked.

Mr. Eastman complied, and Palean strode over to the eye-level dictionary stand.

"You see, Per'fessor," explained Chris King, already feeling much better, "Mr. Eastman pays Palean a nickel every time he looks up a word he doesn't know in that huge new Funkin' Wagnall's. I'm sure that's what my father would do too, if I knew who or where he was. He would say,

'If your Funkin' fails ya'
And you can't find 'derisory'
Dial Bryant seven-eight-hun-dred
For the New York Lib'ary.'

"That was one of my Buster Brown lines," boasted Chris King.

"'Sabotage' is not in here," declared Palean after a few seconds.

"Balderdash, of course it is!" said the professor, storming over to the big book. He bent over the dictionary, but very soon he stood erect and slammed the tome shut.

"It's NOT in there!" exclaimed the professor in disgust. "For your information," he said to the boys, "the definition is 'the malicious and wanton destruction of private property by people of ill-intent,'" he trailed off, mystified.

"You can't think properly, professor, because you are not smoking. If you smoked a pipe, you'd be puffing away right now!" sighed Mr. Eastman, lighting up.

"Perhaps some 'bad person' sabotaged the Funkin' Wagnall's, Professor!" Palean exclaimed.

"Haven’t you ever heard of bad people?" asked the professor. "Don't you people live in the real world?" he sputtered in exasperation.

"Well," Palean replied, locking eyes with Chris King, "we've known boys who don't follow directions and... some whom make occasional slips of grammar," he blurted shamefacedly.

The professor, who couldn't believe his ears, looked to George Eastman for comfort, but the great inventor was shaking his head ruefully at the mere thought of "occasional slips of grammar" and praying that he himself could do better in that department.

"I myself need to try to follow directions better," Chris King admitted, feeling in his pockets for some matches.

"I'll say you do," laughed Palean, lighting a fag for his best pal.

"Tell the Per'fessor the other word that wasn't in there the other day," suggested Chris King.

"'Coolie', that wasn't in there. I looked it up and it wasn't there."

The professor took the last swig of his Coca-Cola and stared at the boys blankly.

"Professor," said Mr. Eastman, "It's up to you to locate the Mann girls and the boy who perpetrated this dastardly crime."

"But where can they be?" asked the professor.

"Tampa!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. George Eastman, pounding his fist into his hand.

"Say what?" cried Chris King.

"They could have hitchhiked to Tampa by now," spoke the great inventor.

The professor had his mouth set to speak, but Mr. Eastman stopped him.

"They could easily be in Tampa by now," he continued. "I once got to Tampa in record speed. You must leave for Tampa immediately!"

"But sir, that's merely a guess..." started the professor.

SLAM! went the big fist of Mr. George Eastman down onto his replacement desk.

"There's another expression we have up here, Professor, besides 'photogenic.' It's 'don't disagree or argue with me or so help me, I'll cut you down in a New York minute!'" His face broke into a broad smile again. "Do you catch my drift?"

"Oh, yes," cried the startled professor, who was now ready to depart Rochester even if it meant going to Tampa.

"And Palean here shall be your traveling companion," announced Mr. Eastman, to the mutual surprise of everyone, mainly because he just thought of it.

"But a... boy!" the professor sputtered. "How can he--?"

"Old Palean here," explained Mr. Eastman as he put his arm on the boy's shoulder, "first sailed to Europe when he was two. He has his own private rail car--"

"And locomotive!" Chris King interjected.

"--fully staffed and equipped by Peter Clark. Just drop the boy off at the nearest station and he'll get where he's going," concluded Mr. Eastman.

"Just drop him off in the nearest ash can, I say!" suggested Chris King, trying to cheer his best pal. He lifted Palean bodily and set him down in the nearest waste basket, his legs dangling out so he couldn't help but laugh.

"He'll always bounce back like a bad check!" Chris King laughed.

The sound of a far-off steeple bell interrupted the general merriment.

"That means one hour to dinner, boys. You have the annual Awards Banquet tonight, or did you forget?" From the looks on their faces, it was plain that the great inventor was correct.

Mr. Eastman bent over his desk and spoke into the telephone, "Photo opportunity, Miss Fortune." Almost immediately, a second secret door opened and in walked a photographer and powder boy with a bright yellow Kodak view camera and tripod. The boys and the professor gathered about Mr. Eastman at his desk and Dean Martineau the cat jumped up to join them. The photographer yelled "Kodak!" and flash powder exploded.

"Out now," said Mr. Eastman, shooing the boys through the fully-repaired French doors.

"How about a little snoot before you catch your barge, Professor? I can't join you, but there's a swell speakeasy and lending library in the basement of the orphanage. Only orphans can go into the orphanage proper, but guests going into the basement, that's perfectly fine. The password is 'cooked, stewed, boiled, and fried.'"

CHAPTER IV. AT THE ORPHANAGE

From his office window, George Eastman could see Palean and Chris King, arms over each others shoulders, starting up the steep hill, atop which was the beautiful Victorian Kodak Boys Orphanage with its broad open porches, as inviting a home as you'd ever wish to see.

It was painted Kodak yellow with green shutters, had three porches which completely encircled the building, and enough towers, turrets, and cupolas to satisfy any bright boy. Never except at slumber time were the verandas or grounds empty of noisy orphans at play, pretending for all the world to see that they didn't care about the stigma that followed them like a shadow.

"Oh man," moaned Palean almost on the verge of tears, "I can't believe I've been framed! What am I going to do, Chris King?"

"Not to worry, dude, I've got your ass!" replied Chris King who suddenly spun around, picked up Palean by the waist, gripped him in a super tight hug, and rocked him in his strong arms.

"Jesus Christ, you're squeezing me to death!" shrieked Palean, laughing and crying at the same time.

"I'm just trying to squeeze some sense into you!" explained Chris King, gently releasing his grip, but making sure that Palean didn't lose his balance.

"Dude, you always know how to reshuffle my mind," said Palean, smiling again and sighing.

"Did you get a load of Mr. Eastman's new secretary?" asked Chris King "Someday perhaps Miss Fortune will be yours!" he laughed and kicked at the shins of his best pal.

"Be serious, Chris King! I have to clear the good name of Palean Packard the third. And I'm glad to be rid of that professor even for a minute."

"Me too," agreed Chris King. "He asks too many questions."

"From now on we tell him... nothing. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" said Chris King.

"And I am SO glad they're not making me depart until after the Awards Banquet tonight, I would have desiccated if I missed it!" said Palean. "This is the first one we've had since we turned fifteen-- and grown up," he continued, bubbling over.

"Dream on, Macduff," chortled Chris King, as he pushed Palean's thick hair out of his eyes. For the rest of the climb, serious conversation was abandoned in favor of the rambunctious pair singing "Someone to Watch over Me" in approximate harmony.

Soon after the boys shambled into the orphanage, they discovered there was nothing to do, in the laughing words of Chris King, "because Master Palean's trunks are already packed and carted away, along with twenty-five cartons of Kodak film."

"Guess there's nothing left to do but cry," gulped Palean.

"Anyways, we gotta get cleaned up for the Awards Banquet," said Chris King.

The boys headed for their large and tastefully decorated orphan's room, an up-to-date lair containing the three necessities: Victrola, Radiola, and Britannica.

"Home again, home again, jiggety jog!" sang Chris King, as he banged opened the door which was never locked.

"A boy's horse whip and a boy's voice on the recording. Who could he be?" asked Palean.

"Search me," replied Chris King as he stripped off his jersey.

"Hey, what in God's green earth is that?!" cried Palean, noticing for the first time the awful purple bruise on the chest of Chris King. "It's a heel mark, for Christ's sake!"

Chris King was flabbergasted, staring at his chest in the mirror. "How the hell did this happen?" he asked Palean who had rushed over to the aid of his best pal.

"Doesn't it hurt you?" Palean demanded, tentatively touching the wound.

"No!! Believe me, it if hurt, I would have noticed. Those are deep cleat marks on my chest, someone stamped on my chest wearing cleats, and I just found out? What the...? And it looks absolutely horrible," cried Chris King, who was never vain about his appearance.

"Why not?" Palean asked, "Why doesn't it hurt you?"

"I don't know," replied Chris King, pushing back his ginger hair so he could better examine the reflection of his chest in the mirror.

"When did it happen?" asked Palean.

"I wish I knew, it wasn't there this morning."

"And where's your St. Christopher medal? You had it on this morning, I remember."

Reaching for his neck, Chris King exclaimed, "Goddamn, you're right, I just noticed. It must have come off when I fainted."

"But it wasn't on the floor of the office, I know I looked to make sure hadn't dropped anything. Remember, I brought you your smokes?"

"Yeah, that's right, I remember that part." He was lost in thought.

Suddenly, Palean snapped his fingers. "I bet I know what happened!" he announced, pulling out from the back of his trousers the latest Hardy Boys mystery, *The Secret of the Old Mill.* "Page 100."

"What the hell does that have to do with me?" asked Chris King as he pushed the book away.

"Maybe someone kicked you on purpose to steal your medal!"

"Oh yeah, that's right! And who did it-- the invisible man? This isn’t a kid's book, it's my body! You and the Hardys!" Chris King exploded.

"Well, how do you explain it?" countered Palean. "Stigmata? How could you get stigmata? You're the absolute least likely boy in the entire orphanage to get stigmata. I'm serious."

"I'm serious!" repeated Chris King, mocking Palean.

"Really, dude."

"So your idea, Aunt Gertrude, is that while I was out cold, someone came in the room, that you three guys did not see or hear, and calmly slammed his cleats into my chest, stole my medal, and split without making any noise?"

"Yes, unless you have another idea."

"But that's ridiculous, how would they know I was going to faint?"

"Because they made you faint."

"How? And who is they? I thought everybody liked me," Chris King added hopefully.

"I dunno, but it must have happened very fast, right? You just went to the food and--"

"Yeah, that's right. I started with the eggs, then I took some sausage, damn they looked good, and the next thing I knew I was wearing them."

"You were right next to the door to Miss Whitney's office," said Palean. "And the way you fiddle and faddle and *concentrate* on trying to get your plate just right, someone *could* have driven in, in a Mack truck."

"Well, it wasn't Miss Fortune because he wasn't wearing cleats."

"Holy Toledo!" cursed Palean, slapping his forehead, "Now I remember what I wanted to tell you. Miss Fortune came in before you got there and guess who was with her? Some thirteen year-old-kid she said was her son and who she said had just arrived in town from his school this morning. And his name was the same as a school, oh yeah, Taft, Roger Taft, that's his name."

"Was HE wearing cleats?"

"No," replied Palean impatiently, "he was in coat and tie, wool trousers and dress shoes-- and a beanie!"

"Then your hypothesis makes no sense."

"*That's* what I wanted to tell you!" exclaimed Palean, snapping his fingers like crazy. "That kid didn't just get to town this morning! I saw him last night prowling around down near the Kodak sprocket shop or somewhere, I can't remember." Palean lit a smoke and continued.

"And Miss Fortune made a point this morning of saying that the kid was in Mr. Eastman's offices because he had *just* arrived unexpected-like, otherwise 'I would never bring him to the office,'" Palean mocked in imitation.

"So she lied," said Palean slowly, watching for a reaction from his best pal. "And they had to be in it together and he could have borrowed a cleat shoe anywhere..." his words poured out. "And now they know it didn't hurt you, because you somehow upset their plan with your super sternum," he added.

"And what was their plan? To put me in the infirmary? To get my medal?"

"Now he has it," snapped Palean bitterly.

"Who?" asked Chris King.

"Cute little Roger Taft with the braces on his teeth, that's who," replied Palean, suddenly snapping his fingers again. "Maybe he stole my whip and pushed the Manns overboard! Could he be the horse whip boy too?"

"Did you tell anyone else you saw him before?" he asked breathlessly.

"No. I thought maybe I'd tell Mr. Eastman, but then you crashed in and I forgot."

"Well, what can we do about it?" asked Chris King. "Now we have two mysteries!"

"I'll track them down and I'll see that they are punished to the full extent of the Lord!" promised Palean.

"But you're leaving town, Palean, remember?" asked Chris King.

CHAPTER V. THE ORIGINS OF CHRIS KING

"Frig it, frig it, frig it, frig it!" cried Palean, rising and returning to his dresser. "Just be careful while I'm gone, dude," he warned Chris King. "How did you come to have a St. Christopher medal anyhow?" he asked. "You're not Catholic. Or are you?" Like most orphans, neither boy had any jewelry to wear, save for wristwatches.

"I dunno," replied Chris King as he installed the extra large flesh-colored Kodak Band-Aid Palean had given him, "but it was when I was still kidnapped playing Buster Brown, and I had just turned nine. We were playing a new theatre with a big lighting switchboard backstage, and when I wasn't on, I hung out there and watched the electricians pull those great levers and spin that big wheel! I learned how to run it, watching. But of course I wasn't allowed to get near it."

Both boys sat down on their beds and lit up another smoke.

"I was sort of hiding out from Mr. Nice between shows, and I overheard two stagehands saying they were going to play a little joke on the electricians. I was the only witness when they shoved a metal rod into the works of the board, jamming the Grand Master in a position so low that no dimmer could be un-interlocked. Then they left. With the Grand Master locked down, the stage was as dark as a pocket."

"The Grand Master! What did you do?" asked Palean eagerly.

"I didn't know what to do, so I just waited, and finally Sam and Ragsdale, the house electricians arrived and discovered the problem. 'We can't do a show without lights!' they said. 'Without lights, we got no show!' cried Ragsdale in despair.

"I made a decision then and there," declaimed Chris King, pantomiming the part for Palean with dramatic emphasis. Somewhere from far off in the orphanage, as if for underscoring, came the dramatic strains of silent film music on a player piano.

"I jumped from my place of concealment and rolled over to the base of the great machine, ten times taller than I was. Then I crawled stealthily between exposed live wires, above me, below me, behind me, to where I could get my hands on that ill-intentioned rod. For you see, I was the only one small enough and strong enough to do it."

"So you pulled it out?" queried Palean breathlessly after exhaling a big puff of smoke. "Just like in the legend of King Arthur, you, Buster Brown, saved the show?"

"No..." started Chris King, also exhaling. "I did just the opposite. With one mighty thrust, I inserted the rod IN, up to the hilt, until there was a crackle of power, a blinding flash, and from the shock I received, I passed out.

"When I opened my eyes, the rod was gone-- burnt up, I guess-- but all the levers were up at full bright and the stage was flooded with light."

"Man, what a story!" admitted Palean, bristling with goose bumps.

"But that's not the end. Mr. Nice showed up just at that moment, and when he found out what I had done, he became furious! He lifted me up by my collar and told me that after the last show, I could expect a flogging. I already got spanked sixty-four times a day as bad boy Buster Brown, so the idea of another whippin' didn't appeal to me at all.

"'Go to the dressing room and stay there until your next cue!' yelled Mr. Nice as he pointed me towards the long staircase."

"Holy Ned!" cried Palean, lighting a fresh fag, "What did you do?"

"First of all, I didn't stay in my dressing room, I didn't even go there. I just grabbed a coat off the rack to put on over my Buster Brown dress and headed for a curio shop I had visited the day before to get my watch fixed. I went straight up to the counterman and asked to buy the St. Christopher medal I had seen, and with money I had secretly saved, I bought it.

"I put it on in the shop," continued Chris King, exhaling, "and got back to my dressing room without being caught. Three LONG shows later, when we finally got back to our hotel room and closed the door, Mr. Nice pulled out his strap.

"As I walked toward him, I unbuttoned my shirt, gave him the wide eyes, and said, 'I'm ready for my whippin', sir,' a line right out of *White Slavery*."

Chris King released more smoke. "His eyes became fixed on that medal and he just left the room. End of story, there was no whippin', I was happy that my new medal offered me the protection I paid for, and I wore it ever since... until today, that is." From far off, the piano music ended.

After a moment, Palean stood and began to dig in his top dresser drawer.

"Well, until we locate your medal, here's a different sort of Grand Master, if you like it," said Palean, holding up a beautifully-crafted key on a green lanyard. He handed it to Chris King, who promptly put it around his neck.

"It reads, 'GREAT Grand Master' on the front," observed the happy recipient, "and on the back are engraved six little numbers, 'eight, six--'" but Palean interrupted him. "Don't say them out loud!"

As Chris King was about to ask why, Palean shushed him and stood back to survey the sight of the shirtless Chris King wearing the green key.

"Chris King, you're the hope of the old South!"

Just then, a buzzer in their room began to sound, signaling the five-minute warning.

"Why must you ALWAYS contribute to my delinquency?" implored Chris King, who was suddenly engulfed and nearly squozen to death by Palean, in imitation of his best pal's earlier bear hug. And like Palean before him, Chris King nearly lost his balance.

CHAPTER VI. AT THE AWARDS BANQUET

Almost on time, the two orphans arrived at the Awards Banquet and took seats at their assigned table. Like all the other boys, they were wearing freshly-laundered Brooks Brothers soccer togs, for they never wore anything else. To the faux irritation of Palean, Chris King was smoking his special occasion pipe.

The banquet was held in the largest room of the orphanage, the Grand Ballroom and on the stage was the Master of Ceremonies, Godfrey Daniel, the staff waiter who was well-liked among the orphans and admired because he was one of two boys there with even a trace of facial hair. He was two inches taller than anyone else and Arrow collar ad handsome, with golden tresses and a lantern jaw. At sixteen he was the oldest inhabitant of the orphanage.

"I'm usually your waitronic slave, but tonight I'm your master-- Master of Ceremonies, that is!" he laughed into the amazing new public address transmitter, punching each line for comedic affect. "Hey, this room is so packed tonight, we're the only place in town with a maximum!" bantered Godfrey Daniel to the delight of the room.

"Who was that manly Kodak soccer player I saw you with last night?" he asked an orphan at a side table. Without a beat, Godfrey Daniel answered the question himself: "That was no soccer player-- that was my wife!"

The audience shrieked in laughter as the room began to fill up with smoke and the tinkle of glasses.

Godfrey Daniel continued, "And now the hilarity must cease if you want me to get the awards right!"

Godfrey consulted his list, and read "Winner of the Least Improved category goes to--" and he proceeded down a litany of awards, each one met with great applause, including Least Valuable Player, Boy with Smallest Brainpan, and the team's favorite, "Boy with a Wisp voted Weast Wikely to be Weighed."

"But all kidding aside," said Godfrey Daniel, "we can't forget to thank the laundresses who wash our twenty-five boys' soccer things every day, except Thursdays, and for the maids who make our beds, sometimes more than once in a day. And finally, a special award for young Mary

Kitchen who came to us direct from the Middle School Touching Zoo. It's not just because she's our dietician, but because she made us pockets in all our jerseys for cigarettes! Three cheers for young Mary Kitchen!"

The orphans responded with loud cheers as the young Mary, a beautiful fourteen-year-old girl with long straight hair and all the attributes that fifteen year-old boys dream about, blushed from her head down to her lovely toes.

"And now, as is our annual custom, I, the oldest inhabitant, shall ask the youngest inhabitant, thirteen-year-old Cheshire Bridge, to say the Awards Banquet prayer, which he has written especially for this occasion."

The youngest inhabitant scrambled up to the stage, threw his notes on the podium and after clearing his throat, began to pray rapidly in a pleasant froggy voice.

"Bless George Eastman who makes us work hard,
Chris King too, and Palean Pack-ard.
Mary Kitchen our Dietician,
And God Bless God but not Prohibition.
Amen."

"Amen, Cheshire Bridge," said Godfrey Daniel to the boy. "That was quite lovely." To the crowd, he announced, "And now you impatient slobs finally get to eat! The beautiful young Mary Kitchen has prepared a sumptuous meal of salmon croquettes, tomato aspic, boiled custard, and refrigerated fruit. All accompanied by the sweet strains of the Kodakolas who have staggered upstairs from the Dark Room for this special night."

That news brought loud cheers from the crowd, Mary Kitchen blushed again, and Chris King said to Palean, "Hey, that's just like you."

"What is?"

"A refrigerated fruit!" The best pals laughed and tussled as the dinner music began to play.

But no sooner had the boys enjoyed their four-course dinner when Godfrey Daniel interrupted the merriment by holding up his long arms.

"If I may now have your attention! This is a surprise, even to me. I have a special guest to introduce, Mr. Peter Clark of New York City!"

Suddenly, the lights went out and just as suddenly, a brilliant picture was seen on a movie screen which had been lowered to the stage.

"It's a flicker!" exclaimed Chris King.

A trim fifty-year-old with blue eyes and a crown of blonde hair strode into the flickerless frame with purpose. "Greetings to the orphans! I am Peter Clark!" spoke the image, as clearly as if the man had been there in person.

"A colored talkie!" exclaimed the orphans. "Fox Movietone and Kodachrome together!" cried others, who knew that they were seeing an entirely new invention. The image was perfect in every detail, except behind the speaker the familiar flag was of different colors.

"What an honor to speak to a soccer team that has never played a single game!" said Peter Clark.

To the crowd, where consternation was about to reign, the screen image added quickly, "Pipe down boys! Oh yes, I know your secret and I know a lot more too!" On the film track, a piano accompaniment began, slowly building to a crescendo as the talk proceeded.

"You boys have never met me, but you know my work-- my Peter Clark scenic counterweight system and my stage elevators. When I opened my shop, there were only a handful of these machines in the United States. Today, they are installed not only at your Eastman Theatre, but at two hundred and fifty other theatres around the country. These devices are intended for one purpose and one purpose only: performance! This year, an astounding one thousand new theaters will open. And what is a theatre except a church with exit lights? Why, the new Roxy Theatre in New York is known as a cathedral! To perform is the supreme purpose of existence!"

As the audience noisily devoured these amazing facts, Palean was struck by the similarity of accent between Chris King and Peter Clark, who also spoke in a lyrical Boston Irish brogue.

"Have you ever wondered why you have never played a soccer game?" asked the film image. "Ever wondered why you have never met anyone from the outside world? It's because you have been carefully protected."

"Where have we been?" whispered Palean to Chris King. "I never even thought of that!" "Me neither," replied Chris King. "No wonder the per'fessor thought we were morons!"

"Now what I am telling you is a super secret, boys, and it must remain so," confided Peter Clark, leaning forward on the podium. "This orphanage is an incubator and you are the chicks. Fifteen years ago, when most of you were born, Mr. Eastman and I hatched a scheme to see if boys with open minds and open faces could run this world better than old men."

From the audience came gasps of surprise.

"While the greatness of American Knowhow cannot be downplayed, there seemed to us to be a lot of 'American-don't-know-how,' and George and I wanted to find out why. After much investigation and rumination, we decided that everything that the real world was being taught was backwards, that the actual truth was the opposite. Bad is good, good is bad. Even the colors of our flags are wrong, as you can see from the corrected banner hanging behind me."

Mr. Clark lit another cigarette as he continued. "You boys have been selected not to be normal. What have you in common? Good looks, great intelligence, spunk, and without exception you all possess the secret ingredient, 'B.E.'"

The orphans looked around at their mates, wondering what on earth B.E. could be. Mr. Clark had rushed through this recital, puffing his cigarette as if it were a toy, as the audience sat rapt with attention, on the very edge of their seats, some breathing heavily. "This guy is the real thing," they all thought in amazement.

"Paradise shall be yours," smiled the image as he winked at the boys. "And you shall be rewarded with the best possible outcome! Am I right, Chris King and Palean Packard?" asked the image of Peter Clark, pointing directly at the astonished orphans as he spoke their name.

"Today your adventure commences. Let it begin with a bang!"

BANG! came a loud noise from the projection booth in the rear of the room. "The film has exploded!" cried the operator. And then the screen went white, leaving an inspired and slightly altered audience.

"Jesus!" exclaimed Palean to Chris King, who was startled beyond words. "Let's get out of here!" and the pair snuck away without saying goodbye and out into the bracing night air.

The orphans were beside themselves with excitement as they smoked and talked for the whole twenty minute walk to the train depot. And yet the more they talked about what Peter Clark had said, the less they remembered. "Are we in a dream?" asked Chris King.

"The sooner I get to Tampa, the sooner I'll return," replied Palean as the best pals shook hands earnestly. "'Sighs expedite nothing.'" Then he boarded his private train, which departed instantly.

In a matter of seconds, Master Palean Packard the third was just a speck in the distance and in the eyes of Chris King.

CHAPTER VII. TAMPA

"This isn't at all what I expected of Tampa!" exclaimed the professor to Palean Packard after they had finally met up after a day and a half of travel.

The duo was standing outside the Tampa Orphanage for the Young, looking at the waves of the sea, just a few hundred yards from both the orphanage and the Staylonger Auto Court where Professor Zimmer intended to lodge.

"First of all, there are no automobiles here! Where are the automobiles? It's so... quiet! I spotted one green taxi, but no buses, only silent motor gondolas in canals! Canals! I've never been here, but no one ever said to me, 'Say, check out Tampa, it's the new Venice!'" The professor exhausted himself and held onto the building for support.

"Buck up, Professor," suggested Palean. "The real world can be tricky."

"Look, let's just check in at the Staylonger Auto Court..." moaned the professor.

"Oh sorry Professor," interrupted Palean, "but I have to stay at the local orphanage, the Tampa Orphanage for the Young, next door to your Auto Court. It's Orphan Rules, we're all one outfit with different branch offices."

"OK!" exploded the professor. "I check in at Staylonger, you check in at the orphanage. Then where can we go? I'm hungry."

"And I want a drink real bad," Palean panted.

"Bad-ly" corrected the professor.

"Yeah well, the orphanage has an excellent speakeasy called the Scout Knife, where visitors like you can mingle with the orphans like me. It's run by a French guy Monsieur Vinour, real classy place, great food."

"Proceed," said the professor as he picked up his bag.

A half hour later, and after Palean made the professor say the universal password, they entered the Scout Knife where maitre de Monsieur Vinour greeted them warmly and took them by the hands. "Table for two?"

"Make it four, please," said the professor, slipping the French man a new dollar bill. "We might have company, I hope," he continued, hoping to see a female hat check girl.

"But of course, a *mirrored* table for mixed doubles!" Monsieur Vinour commanded and showed them to a deluxe booth against the wall, elevated above the main floor with a good view of the clientele. The chic decor of the book-lined lair, filled with the aroma of good strong tobacco, the hum of animated conversation, and the lilting piano of Ford Lanier gave the Scout Knife the perfect ambience for adventure.

"Godfrey Daniel!" exclaimed Palean as their waiter approached. For to Palean's surprise, their waiter was none other than Godfrey Daniel from the Kodak Orphanage.

"Once you're assigned a waiter," explained Godfrey Daniel to Palean, "he's yours for life. And I have taken the liberty of ordering your drinks, according to the proscribed regimen set down for you."

Hardly had Godfrey Daniel left the table when the front doors burst open, and in banged Chris King with a cat in his arms.

"Chris King! What are friggin' hell you doing here?" spouted Palean in delighted surprise.

"Well, to be honest, things were getting pretty bleak up at Kodak without you," explained Chris King, releasing Dean Martineau to his own devices.

Palean was laughing so hard he could hardly keep upright. Between fits of joy, he consulted his wristwatch and said, "But I was only gone fifteen minutes!"

"Time flies when you're not having fun, buddy," countered Chris King. "Oh yeah, and on the way to the Kodak train depot I found the cat too, so I can also say I came here because I found the cat. Now I hope I can find some fun!"

"Well, whatever the reasons, please join us here by all means," said the professor, indicating the table and trying to get over his shock.

"Sudden entrances," he asked Chris King, "Are they your specialty?"

"Along with sudden disappearances," replied the orphan.

"And Godfrey Daniels is our waiter," explained Palean.

"What?" spouted Chris King.

"He's always our waiter, I just found out," replied Palean, laughing excitedly.

"And I've already ordered for you, Chris King," said Godfrey Daniel, who had suddenly appeared with his tray bearing drinks.

As the orphans sipped their newly-arrived cocktails and the professor slurped his Coke, he asked Palean, "What's that you were reading while you were waiting for me at the train today? School work?" he asked doubtfully.

"Oh, it the latest Hardy Boys, excellent literature and vocabulary builder, *The Secret of the Old Mill*." Palean pulled the book from out of the back of his trunks and displayed it proudly.

The professor harrumphed and said, "Just another example of your inability to tell fact from fiction!" He then excused himself to visit the Men's Smoking Lounge. "Get me another!" he told the boys, and "Goddamn smoke!" he sputtered to himself as he walked off.

"Damn, this Chardonnet is GOOD, Chris King! Cheers!" laughed Palean, happy to have his best pal back where he belonged.

"Palean, I've been dying to tell you: Miss Whitney was found!" Chris King exploded.

"You mean Mr. Eastman's real secretary?

"Yes! She was found bound and gagged and left for dead in the sprocket-punch silo, but the coppers made fast work of it and rescued her directly after you left!"

"What about Miss Fortune?" asked Palean breathlessly.

"She and Roger Taft, if those are their real names, have flown the coop."

At that moment, Godfrey Daniel glided back over to their table bearing another Coca-Cola for the professor.

"We didn't even order it yet!" exclaimed Chris King.

"No need to trouble yourself with ordering. And here's something else for you, compliments of the Scout Knife," said Godfrey Daniel as he placed a small case on the table and opened it.

"These guys here are marijuana cigarettes," he explained. "You don't smoke them like you would a normal fag, just light one and share it. Take a deep drag and hold it in. Go ahead, try it."

The orphans did as they were directed, while Godfrey Daniel continued. "Now in this vial is finely ground cocaine. Dump a little bit on the mirrored part of the table, but don't get it wet. Form the powder into little lines like this, and then use this short straw to inhale it up your little noses. Let's see you do a line. Uh oh, wait! First you have to exhale, WITHOUT blowing the stuff off the table! OK, go for it!"

Again, the orphans followed the instructions to a tee.

"Now what is in these shot glasses is called tequila. Watch me, make a loose fist with your right hand. Now I'm going to sprinkle a little damp salt across the top. Ready? Now, in rapid succession, you're going to lick the salt, throw your head back and drink ALL the tequila, then suck on the wedge of lemon before you. Exhale again. Ready? Go!"

"Holy Communion!" exclaimed Palean, as the boys completed the third sacrament. "This is going to be one hell of a party!" exclaimed Chris King.

"If anyone asks you, concluded their waiter, "tell them this is your proscribed regimen. This is your fuel. Cigarettes help you think, marijuana helps you dream, and alcohol and cocaine help you to have fun. Here, there are no penalties for pleasure. On the contrary, the heavier the intake, the better you will feel in the morning. As an added bonus, they will make the professor more interesting. The drugs are for you to keep, and I'll make sure you never run out. Cover the stuff with your napkin until the professor is too drunk to notice. Any questions?"

"Are there any rules?" asked Chris King.

"Yes. Use your proscription only AFTER work or sport. And share it only with boys who are old enough to know better. Enjoy!" said Godfrey Daniel, as he departed.

In their delightfully heightened state, the orphans merrily yakked on until Chris King shushed Palean to silence as the professor returned to the table and announced, "You know, that's the cleanest bathroom I've ever seen in my life! It's as if it's never been used."

"Godfrey Daniel brought you another Coca-Cola, Per'fessor," said the helpful Chris King. Then the orphans had no choice but to listen politely as the professor prattled on and on and on.

After his fourth Coca-Cola, the professor's voice was beginning to slur as he asked, "May I please have a cigarette?" The boys laughed and delightedly complied.

"I can't for the life of me figure out why we're in Tampa, or why there are canals here, or why these Coca-Colas are so damned enjoyable. I'm not even hungry anymore, and I didn't eat since this morning. I'm smoking and I don’t smoke!"

The professor was oblivious to the surreptitious activities of Chris King and Palean, who were again freely partaking of the cocaine powder and enjoying it immensely.

Lost in his own world, the professor from Cleveland began to sing off-pitch and quite loudly. "There's a helluva situation up at Yale, there's a helluva situation up at Yale. As a means of recreation, they resort to--"

"How can we be rid of this guy?" whispered Palean, who had clamped his hand over the professor's mouth just in time.

"Refresh yourself!" blasted the professor to no one and to everyone, and on the last syllable, he keeled forward, hitting his head on the table with a bang.

"There's a helluva situation up at Yale!" harmonized Chris King and Palean gleefully, as they hoisted another tequila shot in toast.

CHAPTER VIII. MEETING THE TWINS

"Where was the per'fessor when the lights went out?" laughed Chris King.

Palean snapped his fingers. "In the dark! That's it! That's where I saw Roger Taft lurking, not at the Kodak shop, but going into our speakeasy-- the DARK Room in the basement of the orphanage."

"Wow! They don’t allow in kids that young. And what was he doing there? And who would he know?" pondered Chris King. "Maybe he was trying to meet girls! Maybe he's a real man after all, despite the fact that he only goes into battle with the unconscious."

"You know this cocaine is really doing a job on me, Chris King," said Palean as he gazed at the other boy as if for the first time. Out of nowhere he exclaimed, "You've got B.E.! I can see it, clear as day!"

But Palean's reverie was rudely interrupted by a sudden disturbance on the main floor near to their table. Maitre de Monsieur Vinour was in the middle of a heated argument with two tow-headed teen boys, holding one by the shoulders and shaking him. The boys' clothing was shabby and long outgrown.

"Poor guys," said Palean. "Looks like Monsieur Vinour's going to toss them out."

"They're twins," exclaimed Chris King. "Look at them!" Even from afar, the good looks of the pair were startling.

"Wow!" agreed Palean.

"I’m going over there," Chris King decided. He rose and joined the fray, standing between the twins.

"What seems to be the trouble, Monsieur Vinour?" he asked.

"Ah, Senor Chris King, these boys have a beer, but have no money to pay the Scout Knife," he related in his all-but-incomprehensible French accent.

"I lost the money," boldly lied the more manly of the identical twin boys.

"No, he didn't, I lost it," interrupted the shy and downcast twin, who wore black horn-rimmed spectacles.

Chris King put one hand on each boy's shoulder.

"Well, it's all settled, now, Monsieur Vinour," he said. "They can join our party. We have plenty of room, even with the sleeping per'fessor."

"Very good, Senor Chris King, "I'll send over your waiter."

"And send over the cigarette boy, too, I bet these twins need a smoke."

The grateful twins followed Chris King back to the raised booth like happy puppies.

Once the twins were seated across from Palean and Chris King, our heroes got a good look at the younger boys, and it was plainly evident that, despite the fact that they were identical in every way, there was a difference that showed from within. One twin used his big spectacles mainly to look down, since his head was usually buried in his chest.

"I am Chris King and this is Palean Packard the third, and we're orphans, and this here guy is the Per'fessor from Cleveland and he's passed out from an overload of Coca-Cola. We normally live in an orphanage in Rochester, New York."

"Right now, we're here in Tampa trying to find the missing Mann girls and the boy who framed me," recounted Palean, looking at his watch. "We just got here three hours ago!"

"Say, what are your names?" asked Chris King.

"Scott," they both answered at once.

"It's true," said the more manly boy. "We're both named Scott. When we were born, our parents figured we'd get mixed up anyway, so they named us both the same, like 'why bother?' Since then, no one has cared enough to tell us apart."

"It has saved a lot of time," he added helpfully.

"Well, we can't call both of you Scott," said Palean. To the manly boy he said, "You look like a kid from Waterbury I once knew, so I'll call you Scott-George. He's dead, so you can have his identity."

"And you can be Scott-Luke," added Chris King. "Actually, you look like this kid Luke's brother, but I don't remember his name."

"What would you guys like to drink?" asked Palean, as Godfrey Daniel marched up to their table. "We're having Chardonnet with tequila shots, that's our usual."

"Sometimes I get a beer," interjected Chris King, seeing the hesitation of the manly Scott-Luke. Breaking the stalemate, Palean ordered for them.

"Godfrey Daniel, please bring us the usual and get the twins the same, with beer on the side." The drinks arrived instantly, and the talk continued.

"To new friends!" toasted Chris King. Hailing the cigarette boy, he purchased a double order of fags for the grateful twins, who immediately lit up and drank.

"Where do you guys work, Scott-George?" asked Chris King.

"At the carnival, at least until tonight. I was a sweeper and Scott, I mean Scott-Luke worked in the box office. I got fired and was run off, so I brung Scott-Luke with me. See, there was this real pretty French blonde girl our age, Phoebe, and the manager claimed I ripped her bra strap and ripped her shirt wide open, but it was another boy that did it, I watched him do it accidental-like, and he lied and had me fired, even though we would never do nothing like that! And they wouldn't even give us the pay we had comin'," related Scott-George bitterly.

"Poor Pheobe," cried Scott-Luke.

"Who was this evil man?" The orphans' thoughts were going crazy over the idea of a girl, just about their age, having her chest rudely exposed.

"Tweren't no man; it was a little blonde kid named Roger Taft."

Palean and Chris King exchanged a long, meaningful look. Could this be the same Roger Taft, down here in Tampa, Florida?

"Since we can't afford to stay any longer at the Staylonger," Scott-George continued ruefully, "we got our bags out and decided to spend our last nickels to get drunk!"

"You see, Scout Knife is the only place where boys fourteen like we can get served. Scott-Luke just turned fourteen," said Scott-George.

Scott-Luke looked up and nodded his head in agreement.

"A very wise decision," said Palean. "What else could you do?"

"And then I found out I'd lost our money," Scott-Luke sniffled in despair.

"Man, you saved our skins! Thanks again!" exclaimed Scott-George as if suddenly remembering, and the manly twin shook hands all around.

"If we were orphans, we could stay at the orphanage," said Scott-Luke, slow and shy.

"Right," agreed Palean.

Scott-George spoke again, in a low voice.

"We're really runaways, but we've never told anybody. Not only did our parents name us the same, but until the day we left, they forced us to share the same clothes, sleep in the same bed, and--"

"We don't ever want to go back!" interrupted Scott-Luke, a tear running down his cheek.

"Wow!" exclaimed Palean to Chris King. "Twins, runaways, accused rapists, AND carnival trash!" His voice was filled with admiration. "I've never met any of any of those before!"

"Just because we're runaways, we're not bums," proclaimed the stoic Scott-George, "and we always try to keep a job and I make sure Scott, I mean Scott-Luke here, never has to... sleep on the street."

Scott-Luke looked up and smiled at the mention of his new name. He was definitely happier with a cigarette and a drink.

"We saw the rich 'normal' boys who weren't twins going to school so happy with their sports and their girlfriends, sliding through life while all we heard was 'why can't you be like a non-twin?'" snorted Scott-George ruefully. "Everybody was always trying to 'straighten us out.'"

"It seems like we should get a gold star on our gravestones or something like that," spoke Scott-Luke with the start of a lopsided grin.

"Why a runaway twin," realized Palean, "is just short of being an orphan!"

"Wait!" said Chris King, catching Palean's excitement. "I know! You guys can be orphans-in-training!"

"Great idea, Chris King!" said Palean with unabashed admiration for his friend, patting him on the back.

"I don't know," said Scott-George, who fancied himself a tough guy, "we've never been in any club."

"I want to be an orphan," said Scott-Luke softly to his brother.

"If you join up, you can crash right here in the Scout Knife, where there are secret guest rooms," offered Chris King.

"But how can you know that if you just got to town?" asked Scott-George suspiciously.

"Because all orphanages have the same secret rooms and the same Orphan Rules," said Palean.

Scott-George held a whispered conference with Scott-Luke.

"How much will it cost?" asked Scott-Luke, looking Chris King straight in the eye.

"And for how long?" asked the manly twin gazing at Palean.

"For as long as you want, meals included, and it's free," said Chris King.

"And it's not what you're thinking," said Palean. "It's not a flop house. You would each get a *clean* luxury bachelor apartment with maid service and bathtub, and it's completely soundproof."

"Are we going to be making a lot of noise?" asked Scott-Luke, really cheering up for the first time since they had met him.

"That's up to you, of course, but the rooms are handy if you are making a business deal on the floor here and you want to consecrate it in private," explained Palean, puffing on his cigarette.

"Does he live there?" asked Scott-Luke, pointing to the sleeping professor.

"Don't worry about him, he's at the Staylonger," explained Palean.

"What do we have to do to join up?" asked Scott-George, completely won over.

"Merely a secret handshake!" as Chris King showed the eager boys the new trick.

"You are now officially orphans-in-training-- George and Luke!"

All the boys toasted the event. "Finally we get rooms of our own!" exclaimed Luke.

"Hold up a second," laughed Palean, looking at the jubilant twins. "You need an ID card, or something to commemorate this historic moment... I know!"

Palean snapped his fingers and summoned the nearest cigarette boy.

"Can you see there, among your tiny lifelike Kewpie Dolls, have you any--?" and he whispered to the fag kid. "Perfect! Here's a fifty because you're nifty!"

Turning to the twins, he presented each of them with a shiny new fish band, which they promptly put around their necks.

"Oh my gosh! Now we belong to someone!" said the awed boys, almost together.

"We won't EVER take them off!" spouted Luke.

"Now if you fall when you dream, there's someone to catch you!" puffed Chris King as he lit the two cigarettes he held in his mouth and handed one to Palean.

"And for new members of the club, we have more special surprises," put in Palean, removing the linen napkin he had previously dropped over the drug paraphernalia. "It's our regimen--"

"As legally proscribed!" added Chris King oxymoronically.

"Merry Christ-mas!" exclaimed the twins in delight.

All the boys dug in, then stayed silent for a moment as the pleasant effects began to course through them.

"Hey, I just thought of something, exclaimed Chris King. "If Luke took off his spectacles, you two would look exactly alike!"

"Yep, we're identical in every single way," replied George who was desperately trying to grasp Palean's meaning.

"I mean, you could take each other's places. You could be swapped, you see, and no one would ever know the difference!" explained Chris King to the mixed-up twins, who looked at each other in bewilderment.

"I get it!" Luke exclaimed finally, leaning over close to explain to his brother. "But what does it mean?"

"It means we can use you to help find the Mann girls, Miss Fortune, and OUR Roger Taft!" said Chris King, and he and Palean recounted the

events at Rochester, leaving out the Roger Taft stomping part, which they had decided to keep a secret for the time being.

After the briefing, serious talk was forgotten as the enjoyment of the floor show and consumption of healthful pleasures accelerated at a tremendous pace. Safe and sound with the orphans, the twins really unwound like they never had before. The four boys partied together the whole night long, including a round of oceanic skinny-dipping by the full of the moon.

CHAPTER IX. WHAT THE TWINS KNEW

After a night of basking in the dark of the Tampa Scout Knife with the twins, the now suntanned Palean and Chris King were getting dressed for a sumptuous breakfast that had just been delivered to their guest room in the Tampa orphanage. Suddenly, in through the open second-story window barreled the twins, hollering like Injuns.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" yelled Chris King. "Window twins!" screamed the delighted Palean.

Chris King picked the giggling, disheveled boys up off the floor like they were feathers and sat them on his bed. "You guy are strictly NOT allowed in the orphans' rooms! Not in the orphanage at all!"

"We know we know, Orphan Rules!" spouted George with great excitement.

"Golly, you have great splotchy freckles on your shoulders, Chris King!" exclaimed Luke in wonder.

"The better to see you with, duplicate boy!" laughed the object of his gaze.

"Stop panting over the messiah and have a cup of cwaffee, smoke a cigarette, and relax yourselves up!" counseled Palean as he passed out the mocha java and fags.

When the twins were as calm as they could get, George spoke first. "Remember last night?" he asked.

Everyone laughed at that one.

"No, I mean, last night something you guys said about the Staylonger Auto Court rang a bell with us," said George, now in a serious mood.

"Roger Taft-- we had seen his name on the register there, when we checked out, but I totally forgot about it."

"So we got up early and had breakfast," said Luke, his eyes shining, "and then we did a little sleuthing for you guys!"

"Go on!" responded Chris King. "Yeah, what happened?" asked Palean.

George replied, "We got into his window--"

"Yeah, so we had practice for YOUR window!" laughed Luke.

"And then we searched his hotel room from top to bottom," finished George. The twins both wore deadpan faces.

"Well, did you FIND anything?" asked Chris King with eager anticipation.

"Speak, you little bastards!" yelled Palean as he grabbed Luke and shook him.

"Just these," said Luke, producing in his hand two matchbooks.

Taking one of them, Palean read, "Taft School Watertown Connecticut. Non ut sibi ministretur sed ut minestret."

"Not to BE served, but to serve!" translated Luke brightly as Chris King poured him a glass of ice-cold fresh-squeezed orange juice.

"That's a GREAT clue, that's probably the school Roger Taft escaped from!" exclaimed Palean.

Chris King nodded in agreement and reached for the second book in Luke's hand, only to find it was empty. "Hey, where'd the other book of matches go?" asked Chris King in surprise.

"Right where it was, Chris King! Have you got freckles in your eyes, too?" asked Luke and with a flick of his fingers, the packet reappeared. Chris King and Palean were dumbfounded.

"We performed an underground magic act," explained George, and Luke added sadly, "until it was outlawed."

"Jesus Christ! You twins are full of surprises this morning!" ejaculated Palean, as he jumped on top of Luke and pinned him to the bed, tickling him as they both giggled.

"We've got a lot of talents we ain't even showed you yet!" laughed George.

"We're versa-TILE!" panted Luke.

"Hey, hey," laughed Chris King. "Get mature! Let me see the other match book."

This time Chris King read the engraving. "'Sky Chapel, 30th floor, Chicago Temple. Nearer my God to thee.' Wow! Chicago!" he exclaimed, looking up. "Balaban & Katz!"

"Were there any other clues?" asked Palean, on the verge of becoming overheated.

"Just this," said Luke, pulling out a rolled-up magazine from the back of his trousers.

"This evidence," intoned Luke solemnly, "was found under the mattress of Master Roger Taft!" and he displayed the garish cover of a well-known adult magazine.

"Oh my frigging God!" exclaimed Palean, tearing up from laughter. "Roger Taft had a dirty magazine under his hotel room mattress?"

"'Physical Culture'" said George, reading the cover. "Someone told me you can get only get this by having them mail it to you! I thought it was supposed to be really filthy..." he laughed.

"What's in that garbage?" asked Chris King, grabbing the book away.

"Not much," said George. "They have good pictures of girlies on the front, guys on the inside, and then a load of stupid stories."

After a second, Chris King exclaimed, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, what's this?" and showed the boys a back page of the book.

George read, "'The boy and Sex.' Whoopee! That's just the article I've been needing to... read!" he exclaimed.

"Read it! Read it!" the boys all chimed in at once, the twins jumping on the bed.

"Holy Guacamole! It's underlined!" spouted Palean.

Chris King scanned through the underlines until he came to the end and said, "Now here's the good part. Roger Taft underlined it twice."

"'She (meaning the boy's mother)'" explained Chris King, looking at the twins to make certain they understood, "'must teach him how to protect his sex mechanism.'"

The room broke out in paroxysms of laughter. Chris King lit a cigarette. All the boys lit cigarettes.

Holding his arm across his mouth as if caped, he intoned, "'Secret vices are easily formed, causing anguish to parents and untold suffering to boys.'

"'You were once too little to play out in the street alone. It is the same with that part of your body. It is not old enough, not strong enough; the use of it now will interfere with its FUNCTION later on.'"

Chris King threw down the book, cried "I suffer for your sins!" and pantomimed the finale.

The twins were laughing so hard they could hardly catch their breath.

Palean jumped in, "Maybe when Roger Taft read 'function,' he thought it said 'Phoebe!'" and his hysterical laughter was contagious to the room.

A full five minutes passed before sanity was once again restored to the room, and Palean stared at Chris King, who was lost in thought.

"I'll wire the Taft School and ask them if they have a Roger Taft there and also I'll ask for a bio and a picture via wireless photoradiogram," announced Palean as he got on the telephone to Western Union. This task accomplished, he stared at the motionless Chris King.

"You look just like a movie star with your perfect tan, Chris King. Penny for your disgusting thoughts?" asked Palean. If truth be known, both orphans were lost in their admiration of the twin's newly-discovered talents. Both boys got a warm feeling to discover a boy with purpose and talent.

"Is Roger Taft still at the Staylonger?" Chris King asked George.

"Nope, he checked out this morning."

"I'm starting to get a brainstorm!" exclaimed Chris King after a moment. Looking at the twins, he said, "Palean and me have got to find out whether YOUR Roger Taft is the same as OUR Roger Taft.

"We need a way to lure YOUR Tampa Roger Taft to a place where we can see him. We have to find out if he's the same awful Roger Taft who falsely accused Palean of horse whippin' the Manns."

"Right, but how?" asked Palean.

"Twin magicians, that's how! Now, Luke, Roger Taft never saw you, is that right? He doesn’t know George has a brother?"

Luke said, "Roger Taft never saw me. I was working in the box office counting deadwood during the entire Phoebe thing. The second they fired George, he just jerked me out of there so fast that Roger Taft never ever even saw me."

"Just as I thought! Good, good." Chris King thought some more. "Palean, you and the twins go on with your breakfast. I've got work to do, and I'll keep in touch with you guys via Western Union messenger."

"Where are you going?" asked Palean, bursting with curiosity. "What's your plan?"

"To make up a flyer and make sure that Roger Taft sees it, to get costumes, props, lights! Tonight, at the Scout Knife, you twins are going to stage the Goddamndest magic show since Harry Blackstone! Palean, you keep the boys sewed up, then cleaned up, and when I tell you, bring them to the Scout Knife... secretly. Meanwhile, I'm going to paper the town with adverts. If my plan succeeds, we'll lure Roger Taft to a magic show he'll never forget!"

"But why the Scout Knife?" asked Palean.

"Because there I will have control of events. From a small secret booth, I shall stage manage, and you shall assist me, via telephone and buzzer. I am 'of the theatre,' you know," boasted Chris King shamelessly as he gobbled his toast with marmalade.

"Holy Houdini! That's brilliant! But I still don't get it..."

"You will!" Chris King promised, and off he went.

CHAPTER X. THE MAGIC SHOW

That night on the stage of the Scout Knife, the plan of Chris King began to take shape.

The advertisements for the boy magicians Chris King dreamed up had worked, and at curtain time that night, the Scout Knife was packed from wall to wall with patrons, the room thick with the fragrance of tobacco smoke and the merriment of clinking glasses. From their secret vantage on the sidelines, Palean and Chris King could see Roger Taft in the first row, with an evil leer upon his handsome visage.

"Holy Hannah!" cried Palean. "It IS the same Roger Taft! I can't believe that you lured him here! Lucky for us, the villain can't see us! Now what?" whispered Palean. Chris King motioned his best pal to silence, and as he pressed another button, there was a flash in the house.

"What was that?" asked Palean.

"We now have a Kodak of Roger Taft!" Chris King exclaimed as he called for the houselights to be dimmed out.

"Man, you are really clicking tonight!" said Palean in admiration. Footlights flooded the front curtain with light and the excitement seemed to push the drape from behind.

"Mesdames and Messieurs!" began amateur MC Monsieur Vinour, stage center. "Tonight, the Scout Knife is proud to present the boy magician extraordinaire-- the Amazing Scott, um, Scott the Amazing. Merde! Stupefiant Scott!" yelled Monsieur Vinour as he left the stage. Coincident with his fast exit there was a flash and the curtains parted.

Illuminated by the blaze of two traveling arc lights, George suddenly appeared center stage, lowered from above on a velvet rope, dressed to kill in a green Houdini leotard and a Kodak-yellow cape. George's thin, muscular body perfectly filled his leotard, bringing oohs and aahs from the ladies in the house. More applause.

"Ladies and Gentleman," said George in his best magician voice, "may I have your undivided attention.

"Tonight, for a great change, I am all alone on stage, with no assistant to aid me or a table filled with tricks to waste your time. For tonight, as you read in the handbills, there is to be only one trick. A trick that will astound you!" And with another flash, the upstage was flooded with light, revealing a huge safe.

The audience gasped, as they and Palean watched in fascination as the show unfolded, all the while Chris King pressing this button and that to achieve his effects.

The magician continued, "I am now going to be locked in this man-sized escape-proof solid steel safe you see behind me, which will be padlocked thirteen times around by a member of the audience, and from which I shall escape within exactly two minutes."

Sounds of incredulity floated up from the audience to the sun-baked teen performer, but no naysayers could deter the manly youth from playing the part assigned him by his new friend and protector, Chris King.

"May I have a volunteer from the audience?"

"You sure can, buddy boy!" exclaimed Roger Taft, leaping up to the stage and approaching George with menace.

"Thank you, boy!" said Scott the Amazing, pretending not to know Roger Taft. "Please inspect the safe and the padlocks and chains to your heart's content," he announced out loud, "if you have one," he thought to himself.

The evil Roger Taft examined the equipment in minute detail and did not stop until he was satisfied that all the preparations were "according to Hoyle."

"And now, boy, please lock me in the cabinet-- thirteen times." George removed the cape from his slender body and tossed it into the wings.

"It will be my greatest pleasure, Scott the Amazing!" said Roger Taft to the audience. "I'll lock you in there for good!" he snarled to George in a stage whisper.

Once George was inside the box, Roger Taft circled it with chain after chain, tightly securing each with a stout padlock.

"The dirty deed is done!" cried Roger Taft excitedly.

As Roger Taft returned to his seat in the first row, the pit band struck up their best misterioso cue, and as a giant clock dial ticked off the seconds, an elaborate circular drapery slowly descended around the magic cabinet. Unknown to the audience or to Palean, Luke, dressed

exactly like George, was concealed within the upstage part of the moving drape.

"And now may we please have complete silence!" asked Monsieur Vinour to no avail. "Please allow Scott Amazing to concentrate... or suffocate," despaired the little French man.

"One minute... one minute and a half... two minutes..."

Just then there was a tremendous flash, the drapery rose fast, and standing in front of the locked cabinet was Scott the Amazing, his leotard torn and worse for the wear. He was wearing glasses as he took a single deep bow. The audience went insane.

"How did you do that???" screamed Roger Taft in rage, when on the stage there was another flash and Scott the Amazing (#2) was also gone.

As the audience roared its approval, the lights faded and the stage curtains drew shut, per the machinations of the stage manager.

"Your switcheroo plan worked perfect, Chris King, boy!" exclaimed Palean, giving his best pal a hearty handshake.

From their booth of concealment, a very pleased Chris King spoke over the house telephone to back stage. "Drop the asbestos! Unloose the rope next to the Peter Clark sign! Lock the doors to and from the stage!"

Roger Taft started up the stage stairs, but his way was blocked by Monsieur Vinour.

"Next show, next Friday," announced the French MC as the fire curtain majestically descended, bearing an original painting of the Scout Knife being raided. To the over-eager Roger Taft, the Frenchman added, "I will be glad to carry a note to Scott the Amazing in the room where he dresses, young man."

"Give him this," snapped Roger Taft, handing a hastily scrawled note to the small man. "I will await his reply," and with a bow, he took his leave. Roger Taft had a lot of aplomb for a thirteen-year-old.

Monsieur Vinour secretly rushed to the secret booth, handing the note to Chris King, who unfolded it and read:

"I liked your magik show and I want to know how the trick worked. Will pay. Meet me at WTAM radio transmitter building at midnight, in the empty, desolate, and abandoned part to town."

"What now?" cried Palean. "That's in one hour!"

"This," and imitating the handwriting of the twins, Chris King scrawled:

"I accept your bold invitation. Scott the Amazing."

"Makes sure he gets this, Monsieur Vinour," Chris King ordered, handing him the re-folded note. When he had gone, Chris King said to Palean, "Now, we sit back and watch the fireworks!"

"Why won't you tell me what's happening?? How can you be so-- oooh! You are the most ex-ass-perating ass at times, Chris King! You are an ass!" But Chris King merely peered out their spyhole and smoked.

The note was duly delivered, and the orphans watched as Monsieur Vinour escorted Roger Taft out the entrance doors.

"He'll not be allowed back in tonight," noted Chris King who as soon as he and Palean and were free from their place of hot confinement, began to bark commands.

"Worklights! Fly the asbestos!" To Palean, he said, "Here's the master key to the thirteen padlocks, now get twin #1 alias George out of that friggin' safe before he dies! Hurry, there's not that much air in there!"

Moments later, the four boys, all in good health, were reunited at a fourtop in the empty nightclub. All were excited over the turn of events. Chris King related the results of the evening.

"So we found out both Roger Tafts are the same, and we have a hopefully good Kodak of him," he informed the twins.

"Why would someone so handsome turn to crime?" asked Luke in a voice of wonder.

"I don't get it, Chris King," started Palean, his voice showing concern. "If George goes into that building at midnight, he's a dead duck."

"That eventuality has been obviated," replied Chris King, speaking in his best scholarly manner, the boy who prided himself in knowing his ABC's-- Aristotle, Balzac and, Chakespeare.

Turning to Palean, he explained in his calm way, "Palean, in our Best-Palship, you are always the one in charge of everything, but this time, it's MY plan, and part of the work I did today was to have a key fashioned," he crowed, producing a large Sargent key and placing it on the table, "a key that fits the back door of the WTAM transmitter building."

For a few seconds, you could hear a pin drop. The overheated and sunburned twins were in a daze.

"But," demanded Palean, "how could you possibly know this morning, twelve hours ago, that Roger Taft was going to select the transmitter house as the meeting place?"

"Elementary, my dear Packard. I selected it for him," said Chris King.

"Remember when Mr. Eastman sent you and the professor down here to Tampa, like on a whim? And what did you find? Pay dirt, that's what--the fact that Roger Taft had beaten us here. So I decided to cash in on the great inventor's success story with a senseless whim."

"What are you talking about?" asked a frustrated Palean.

"I have enjoyed reading all your sexy radio magazines, and I always wanted to go inside a high-powered transmitting station. So I just decided in my head, that's where the meeting was gonna be, and I had this key made and I scoped the place out." He pocketed the purloined key and continued.

"It's a 50,000 watt Western Electric transmitter with a cooling pond for the tubes and it's totally automatic. No one works in the building, so it'll be four against one! Piece of cake," he smiled seraphically.

"Holy Marconi!" spewed Palean in joy and disbelief.

CHAPTER XI. AT THE RADIO STATION

The assembled group left the Scout Knife immediately and climbed inside a heated, waiting taxicab Chris King had reserved.

"Break all speed records getting there, driver, I'll pay any fines," quipped Chris King. Smoke rapidly filled the cab and windows were cracked to allow for breathing.

Finally and without interference, the taxi pulled up at the main entrance to the new stucco WTAM transmitter house. Paying off the driver, the four gathered beneath the elm tree by the road. Chris King distributed brand new wrist watches of a popular make to the twins, who were elated, never having worn one.

The transmitter building was a beautiful sight to behold, Spanish in style and luxurious in detail. It was set off by twin ponds, necessary for recirculation of water to cool and insulate the newly-invented fifteen thousand volt transmitting tubes.

"Luke, at the stroke of midnight, you go in the house with Roger Taft as nice as you can be, and George, you wait until the door is open and rush in, secret-like. The two of us are going through the back door into Studio 50 where we can watch until the right moment to pop out and then we all overpower the lad. Understood?"

Palean and the twins nodded in agreement, and a few minutes later, the orphans took their positions in the darkened radio studio, where they could see out, but no one could see in. The studio faced onto Master Control, a circular room where in the very center was the Master Control Panel, its pulsating lights and meters in constant motion. All around the round room ran streams of electrical cables suspended from hooks. The entire place smelled of ozone, and a steady low hum permeated every nook and cranny of the transmitter house.

"Look, Roger Taft and Luke just came in!" exclaimed Palean. "Flip that switch, Chris King, and see if we can hear them on the loudspeaking telephone." He complied and voices came in so clear and lifelike as to be startling. The boys could hear the voice of Roger Taft as they watched him.

"This is Master Control, boy," emphasizing the last word, "and it revolves to align with the studios and tube room. A Peter Clark installation." For instance, if I want the tube room, I flip this key. See the green light replied?"

The center room began to revolve slowly and silently, revealing a brightly lit glassed in studio, similar to the one the orphans had commandeered. To the horror of Luke, Palean and Chris King, there was a thirteen-year-old girl, weeping and trembling, with her wrists handcuffed and trussed up above her head.

"It's Phoebe!" Luke almost wept. Phoebe's clothing was torn, and in the same painful disarray as his brother had described in great detail. She tried desperately to move her arms as a signal to the boy she knew as Scott.

"Help me, Scott, oh, please help me!" she cried.

"You fiend!" cried Luke, and he rushed at Roger Taft like a human battering ram. But just the instant he reached his target, Roger Taft let go with a dose of sleeping gas straight into Luke's face.

The orphans had seen and heard just about enough and Chris King yelled "Charge!" at the top of his lungs. The boys heaved against the door, banging on it with their fists until they were blistered, but to no avail. It hardly budged.

Chris King turned and rushed to the door through which they had entered, but it too was locked.

"We're locked in Palean! And the room is completely soundproof!" he screamed.

"Pull yourself together," said Palean. "We've got to make your plan work! It's got to work! Let's get to work on this huge door."

Meanwhile, Roger Taft was blissfully unaware that his show had an audience, and as the orphans raced against time, he continued with his scheduled program.

"Good-- the magician is stupefied. Now I'm gonna find out the secret of your trick and show you what a man I really am!" Although Luke was stunned by the gas, he was still standing erect, so it was small work for Roger Taft to handcuff the lightweight twin and truss him from a cable hook so that the runaway's feet barely touched the polished concrete floor.

Roger Taft laughed and threw a tumbler of ice water into Luke's face, which brought him back to earth in a jolt.

The twin tried to free himself, then with a second jolt, realized his inescapable plight.

"Look, Phoebe," said Roger Taft over table microphone on the control desk. "Your boyfriend Scott is tied up just like a little girl."

In a furious demonstration, Luke slammed his slim body back and forth against his restraints, but to no avail.

"And now, as dear Phoebe watches, I am going to give you the beating of your life."

Just as Roger Taft was about to deliver the first blow, Chris King and Palean finally extracted themselves from their prison by the simple but time-consuming expedient of tearing the huge mahogany door from its frame.

Like two Robin Hoods, they crashed into the room and surrounded Roger Taft. "The game is up, my friend," said Chris King.

But right then, and just behind his head Chris King could hear a new voice, a girl's voice, saying, "I think not, Master Chris King" as she knocked him to the floor.

"It's Miss Fortune!" cried the stunned Palean, who momentarily dropped his guard, allowing sufficient time for Roger Taft to give our hero Palean the same rough treatment. All of this the groggy Luke witnessed to his horror.

"Where, oh where, can my brother be?" he thought to himself.

Miss Fortune handcuffed the stupefied orphans and Roger Taft, depressing another key, caused the room to revolve again, so that in the place of pathetic Phoebe, there was the tube room, where gigantic glass tubes, taller than a man, hummed and pulsated and let off a strange and hypnotic flickering glow in orange and other fanciful colors, for broadcasting was truly out of a book of science-fiction.

Depressing another key, Roger Taft opened the glass dividing wall between control and the tube room.

Working rapidly, the evil duo stripped the orphans down to their undergarments and trussed them back-to-back between a pair of the six-foot-high warm and glowing fifteen-thousand-volt tubes nearest to control and visible to the tearing eyes of Luke, the twin. To ensure that the orphans could not escape, the evildoers used splintery hemp rope to tie each boy tightly to a tube.

Adding insult to injury, the diabolic Roger Taft leaned down and cranked the tube chassis train until the boys were wedged together against the hot tubes like sardines in a morning subway.

Their work done, Roger Taft returned to the control panel leaving Miss Fortune behind him, and closed the glass doors into control. Roger Taft was truly happy now, and he spoke into the desk microphone.

"When I press this lever, you boys will be burned to a crisp," exclaimed the half-crazed Roger Taft into his "God microphone."

Roger Taft threw the huge knife switch, and from the tube room came a bright yellow flash, the crackle of high voltage, and the sickening stench of burning flesh. But when the smoke cleared, the orphans were still alive and well, but breathing heavily and beginning to perspire.

"Why aren't they dead?" exclaimed Roger Taft in disbelief. Meanwhile, Luke had passed out from seeing Roger Taft throw the switch, falling limp in his restrains.

Just then with a loud crash, George burst through the front doors and spied his brother tied up and trussed.

"You dirty swine!" George bellowed at Roger Taft. "What you do to one twin, you do to the other!" George cried, and powered with rage, he knocked Roger Taft to the hard floor. George was completely unaware that Palean and Chris King were captive, despite their futile flailing efforts to attract his attention.

His immediate effort was to untie Luke and gently place him on the couch. Then the adrenalin-driven George trussed up Roger Taft as he had trussed Luke.

SLAP! went George's hand against Roger Taft's cheek. The eyes of the defeated villain flashed open.

"So!" murmured the vanquished Roger Taft. "That's you trick-- you are twins."

"Right you are, Roger Taft, and you shall be repaid a hundred-fold for what you did to dear Phoebe!" declared George. And with that, he ripped the shirt clean off Roger Taft's back, revealing a body more mature than that of his captor, a year older.

"And now I'm going to give you the beating of your life!" exclaimed George, his eyes flashing with anger.

Just then Luke awakened.

"George! The orphans! Look!" Luke exclaimed weakly. "You've got to save them! Pull that switch over there! Palean and Chris King are being roasted alive in the tube room! You've got to pull that switch!"

With sudden comprehension, George flew to the switch, but as his hand touched the long lever, in through the main doors flew Miss Fortune.

"Don't touch that switch!" she all but snarled to the flabbergasted twin. "Now both you two twins shall share the same fate as your friends!" She snapped on the lights in the tube room so that George could see the vanquished orphans.

"Oh my God!" gasped George.

"I don't understand!" exclaimed Roger Taft from his near-naked bondage. "Those tubes are up to full power and the orphans are still alive!" he sputtered.

Miss Fortune rapidly released the angry Roger Taft, and they each grabbed a twin roughly by the shoulder and marched them towards the tube room.

"Drop that twin, I say, in the name of the Lord!" All astonished eyes turned to see none other than Godfrey Daniel, in full evening dress, standing at the doorway in a threatening pose.

"Godfrey Daniel!" exclaimed Palean.

Godfrey Daniel rushed forward and swiftly knocked Roger Taft and Miss Fortune to the floor.

Seeing his chance in the confusion, George finally pulled the switch killing the power not only to the lethal tubes, but also plunging the room into pitch black darkness. There were loud sounds of foot scuffle and doors slamming. An agonizing moment later, the lights came back on.

"Look!" cried Luke. "In the tube sockets next to Palean and Chris King! It's Roger Taft, Miss Fortune, and Phoebe! What in God's name can they be doing?"

There was a flash, and the three reprobates were gone, evaporated into thin air.

"Phoebe is part of the gang?" cried George in anguish.

"She's been transmitted!" cried Luke.

"I'll say she has!" grinned Godfrey Daniel, and as he rushed to release Palean and Chris King from their torturous restraints, the twins breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"I was never so glad to see myself in all my life!" George exclaimed, grabbing Luke by the shoulders and hugging him to death. Both boys were drenched in sweat.

Finally, Palean and Chris King were freed, likewise dripping with sweat, their undergarments clinging to them like a second skin.

"Are you OK?" asked Palean. "Are you OK, ol' bud, ol' best pal?"

Chris King looked Palean up and down and said, "For once, I'm glad to see the front of you!"

"Jeepers, that was a tight scrape! I thought it was curtains for certain!" exclaimed Palean.

"Now you can say you've been in some tight squeezes!" giggled Luke, his blue eyes blazing and his clear-throated laughter ringing the air.

And then in staccato overlapping conversations, the survivors swapped tales and brought each other up to date.

"Your wrists are bleeding, Luke!" said Palean.

"I was handcuffed for over an hour I know, because I could see my new watch!" laughed Luke to Chris King.

"Glad to know you're getting good use out of it, boy!" exclaimed Chris King, pretending to a British father puffing his pipe. His hijinks brought the first laughter into the room since the night began.

"I still can't believe Phoebe was in on it!" cried the terribly disappointed George.

"How I overlooked that four-leaf clover, I'll never know," fumed Chris King. "We should have known the humiliation that Phoebe endured, no nice girl would ever permit." All the boys nodded their heads ruefully.

Palean, suddenly remembering his manners, spoke up. "Thank goodness you got here, Godfrey Daniel! How were you notified?"

"I wasn't notified-- Roger Taft walked out on his bill, that's all," he said modestly, as the boys' mouths dropped open in disbelief.

"I've never been stiffed, so after I did all my prep work for tomorrow morning, I tracked him down, crawled through an open window--"

"The window I pried open!" cried George. "I couldn't sneak in when we got here because Roger Taft was watching the door, so it took me almost half an hour to jimmy the thing open! If only..."

"Forget regrets, my friend, they don't exist," consoled Chris King. "You did a yeoman's job, George, you're the top man in your field."

"When I saw how those villains were man-handling you twins, well, it just made my blood boil!" said the taller Godfrey Daniel.

Luke offered his hands to George, and George took them warmly. "We look such a mess, I'm damn glad we don't have any parents to explain things to!" exclaimed Luke, laughing.

"Wow, just listen!" Palean pointed to the large central loudspeaking cabinet. Over the marvelous invention, a deep and disembodied voice said, "This is the inaugural program of the new Columbia Broadcasting System, and we are being brought to you from New York City..."

Palean had run over to the Master Control Panel and exclaimed, "In all of that chaos, the transmitter automatically switched to emergency, and the station never went off the air at all!"

"As Peter Clark would say, 'All hail Western Electric and good old American Knowhow!'" crowed Chris King to the admiring crowd.

"Well, I have to return to my menial duties," announced the still flawlessly dressed Godfrey Daniel. Thank you for a diverting evening. Au revoir!" And he exited through the battered front doors, still standing wide agape.

"Boys," Chris King announced, "in celebration of your successful real-life dramatization of my scheme, we are going back to Luke's room and get blotto-- and tonight we've got the good stuff!"

"Ultra blotto!" cried George and Luke together.

"But where do you think the scoundrels went?" Chris King asked Palean.

"I don't know where they've gone-- but I doubt it's Luke's room," laughed Palean.

"Tonight, the twins have earned their green keys," Chris King whispered to Palean, and each taking a battered boys in arm, the orphans walked off into their night of nights.

Palean thought to himself, "I'm glad you are my best pal, more than I ever was before tonight."

CHAPTER XII. FIRE, DETOUR AND STOWAWAYS

While enjoying a sumptuous breakfast in Luke's room the next morning, Palean received a package via Western Union messenger and Chris King a mailer from Kodak.

"These are the pocket-sized Kodaks of Roger Taft I ordered!" exclaimed Chris King. "Just what I've been waiting for," as he passed them around.

"They're his spittin' image, all right," cried Luke.

"And this is just what I've been waiting for!" exclaimed Palean, gently tearing his package open. "Wow, this photo looks just like your Kodak of Roger Taft, but this boy is older! I don't get it!"

"Try reading for a change," suggested Chris King. "It says, 'Kerry Dutton Taft, age 17.'"

"Shoooo!" said Palean.

"What does the wire say?" asked Chris King.

"Oh yeah," replied Palean, and he read, "We are sorry to inform you that there is no boy by the name of Roger Taft as this school, but there is a Kerry Dutton Taft, whose picture we enclose. He is the perfect boy, good looking and captain of the Field Hockey team--"

"Field Hockey! You can't do better than that!" exclaimed George, until pillows and fists hit their mark and the boy recanted, yelling, "Soccer is better! Soccer is better!"

"May I please continue, children? '...president of the upper middle class, at the top of the Honor Roll, with high positions on the paper, annual, and in debating. Summers in Canada at the family compound. His favorite quotation is, *Go roll your hoop on other than private property*. He abstains from tobacco, alcohol, and all other vices. Kerry Dutton is presently en route to Chicago. Signed, Mildred Reilly, secretary.'"

"It seems like we need to get to Chi on the double," spouted Chris King. "He and Roger Taft look so much alike, they must be related."

"Right you are!" replied Palean, and he telephoned orders to his train that they would be departing within the next half-hour.

"You guys stay here and take care of the professor," said Chris King to the twins.

"Oh, why can't we go to Chi?" the twins begged, but Palean said to them, "We each have important jobs to do, and this is yours. So stop whining and act like little mens," he laughed, "and help me pack fast! And find Dean Martineau the cat and pack him too!"

"While we're gone," said Chris King, "you guys are to take music lessons: George, piano, and Luke, violin. The info is on your telephone pad. And we expect to hear Yehudi Gershwin when we return!" he said, sternly.

"Oh, no!" cried George. "We finally have best friends and now you're leaving us behind-- with homework!"

"Now, now little one," said Chris King. "We shall never abandon you, and besides..." indicating their new watches, "you'll have plenty to do keeping watch that no one tries to harm you. And Palean has a surprise for you in that department."

With that, Palean presented each twin with a green key, almost the same as the orphans', as a reward for their bravery.

"Now don't get swelled heads!" commanded Chris King, and a major pillow fight ensued.

***

Once the two orphans and one cat were seated comfortably on the moving north-bound train, Palean said to his best pal, "Jeez, it sure is nice to be alone again! I love the twins, but it's nice not to have them around every second."

Chris King laughed in agreement.

"And you sure were right about the radio station, Chris King! Though I can’t figure out how," he said.

"Shut up and let me enjoy my first time on your super-private train!" intoned Chris King. "How long to Chi?"

"About a day and half, I guess," replied Palean. "But there's no faster way-- my car has right-of-way over all other trainage, if that's a word in the Funkin' Wagnall's!" laughed Palean. "Look out the window!" he commanded Chris King. "Although I have to admit, there's not too much to see except scenic landscape until we get north of Tennessee."

"Well, I brought along a little educational reading material to help break the monotony," said Chris King, producing the tattered copy of *Physical Culture* from the back of his trunks.

"So that's where it is!" exclaimed Palean in wonder.

"Do I get a private room?" asked Chris King.

"Yes, we have both have private cabins with private tubs," said Palean. "Connecting, in case you get scared in the night."

"You're a most kind benefactor, Master Packard, and I do believe I'll retire to MY room, right now, tata!" laughed Chris King as he hustled down the corridor, Dean Martineau following closely behind.

Palean was dozing when his slumber was interrupted by the voice of the train captain through the speaking tube. "Master Packard, we have stopped the train here at Macon because the telegraph says there's a fire at Atlanta, and we have a stop signal. May I call you on the house phone?"

"Yes, of course, I'm in Observatory." When the instrument buzzed, Palean lifted the receiver and asked, "Fire in Atlanta! Any details?"

"None, sir, and frankly I find that strange. We can't raise Atlanta either by telegraph or by telephone." He paused, and Palean asked, "What are you going to do?"

"With your permission, sir, I would like to request a change of routing. We have no choice but to back up to Brunswick. That'll take six hours, then we'll shoot north to Savannah straight up into Tennessee, then due west until we hit the Cincinnati road north of Chattanooga, which will end our detour. But the whole shebang will cost us another day. We'll take on fuel at Norfolk instead of Atlanta."

"Carry on, Captain Wright! Our fate is in your hands."

As he began to doze again, Palean realized that the trouble was serious, because his train never stopped, except to take on coal, water, hootch, drugs, food, or other necessities.

And when the super deluxe train did stop, it did so quietly. Thus Palean, a sound sleeper, didn't awaken until the car was in motion and once again he heard the buzz of the house phone.

"Yes?" Palean answered groggily.

"Sir, I am sorry to bother you again tonight, Master Palean," apologized the voice of Captain Wright, "but when we just stopped at

Norfolk, we somehow took on some stowaways. Three young sailors were discovered in the wine cellar. Shall I place them in the brig?"

"No, no, that's all right. Send them to me in Observation, alone, but watch them and make sure they come straight here."

When the boys decked out in white sailor suits appeared in a line before Palean, he stood and asked, "Going my way, sailors?"

"If you're going nowhere fast, we're in," quipped Peter, forever the optimist.

"Relax!" commanded Palean. "Take off your caps."

In unison, the sailors lifted their caps and down over their shoulders flowed thick brown hair. "We're musicians," explained Allen, the tallest.

"You guys have really long hair!" exclaimed Palean, admiring the three kids standing before him. Allen was as tall as Palean, but skinny and freckled all over, Gabe was short and skinny, and Peter was the shortest and skinniest. They were all good looking, healthy boys with the complexion of peaches and cream.

"Yeah, we all just got expelled from Norfolk Sailor's Seminary," explained the medium-sized sailor.

"Who are you?"

"Gabe."

"If the truants catch us, we're dead meat," predicted Allen.

"That's Allen," said Gabe, and pointing to the smallest kid, he said, "and this is Peter."

"We're deep fried and roasted," chimed in Peter.

"I'm Palean Packard the third, and this is my train," said the orphan, and the boys shook hands all around.

"How can a kid own a train?" asked Peter who was always curious.

"I'm fifteen, not a kid," he explained. "What year are you in?"

"We're mids, meaning midshipmen, meaning we're fifteen, too," said Peter. "Before this, we got kicked out of the Boy Scouts, the acolytes--"

"For smoking backstage in the Cathedral!" interjected Allen proudly.

This comment prompted Palean to offer packs of cigarettes all around and soon all four were seated, happily smoking and observing.

"--the acolytes," continued Peter, "And kicked out of summer camp where while we were away, our moms donated to the insane asylum all our Buster Brown comics books!" he cried.

"Buster Brown in the insane asylum?" Palean sputtered in disbelief. "Wait'll Chris King hears this-- he IS Buster Brown!"

"And also," said Peter, "we got kicked out of winter camp Marist where we were forced to play sports, and as you can see, we're not very big, except Allen who's tall NOW, but--"

"All we wanted to do was to play music!" crowed Gabe, the drummer. "We have our own jazz band-- the Triplets. But all we heard from our mothers, time and time again, was, 'Why can't you be more like Beaver Bither?'"

"Beaver Bither, the child movie star?" asked Chris King.

"That's the one," moaned Peter. "The perfect boy. Our mothers think life is a movie."

"And everyone else says we have an N.A.-- negative attitude," added Gabe.

"You know how we just got fired?" asked Allen. "Our dorm room at Sailor's Seminary-- a triple-- occupied the entire miniscule top floor of Sea Gull House, and we were the only tenants above floor one," said Peter, flipping his hair.

"So we could rehearse as loud as we wanted!" exclaimed Gabe.

"Well one night after dinner this guy Greg showed up. He had been student president of the whole Seminary two years before we got there, so we'd never heard of him. He seemed real nice, and after we yakked for a while, he asked if we had any cigarettes, which were strictly illegal. Being great guys, we offered him some of ours, and all three of us and Greg, we must have smoked and talked on for an hour or more."

Allen let the story sink in with Palean, who was listening with great interest.

"Before the guy Greg left the campus the next morning, he called at the Dean's office and turned us all in for smoking! Holy cow! This guy Greg was the former head of the whole school, so of course everyone, including our dads, believed him, not us. That's how we got expelled."

"What a friggin' ass!" exclaimed Palean, hardly believing the tale.

"We're forever branded with the scar of expulsion," said Allen, almost in tears.

"Well, Allen, Peter and Gabe, you're welcome to stay here. You can each have a private room with tub and all you can eat. It's just me and my roommate, Chris King, who is asleep right now. We're headed for Chicago on secret business. "

"Wow, we've never been kicked out of a major city!" exclaimed Peter excitedly.

"I hate to ask, but do you have anything to drink?" asked Gabe politely. "We're parched and we didn't have an opener down in your wine cellar."

"Oh, please forgive my bad manners!" And with the push of an ivory button by his side, the observatory silently transformed into a chic book-lined speak, complete with bar, piano, and blind blonde pianist. "Peter Clark," said Palean proudly, when the music had begun and the lights were dimmed.

"He's the piano player?" asked Gabe. "Peter Clark?"

"No," laughed Palean as he began to pour some Chardonnet. "Peter Clark is the genius who tricked up all this furniture!"

"Wow," exhaled the sailors, a bit overwhelmed.

"Do you guys ever do any drugs?" asked Palean, opening his case on the nearby table.

"Do we!" exclaimed Peter. "You got any?" He looked like a puppy begging. "All we had since we were acolytes is rabbit tobacco and cider!"

"When we were acolytes, we cut our coke on the altar!" croaked Allen, and all three sailors went into hysterics at the memory.

"Well," said Palean, "I've got them all, and they're free for the taking."

With Palean's expert guidance, the triplets proceeded to get as high as the Seaman's Bethel.

"Now, said Palean, "let's forget our cares and woes for the moment and party! And after we've lifted a few, perhaps you'd allow me to take some photos of you for my collection. So far, I have only twins, not

triplets," he said, pointing with his cigarette at the framed portraits upon the back wall of the bar.

"Wow, those are altogether... life-like Kodaks," gulped Peter as he bent forward to examine the shot.

"Oh, don't fret," said Palean, "I pay my subjects in cash, so you'll have plenty of spending money!"

And so the train ride to Chicago proved very lucrative for the triplets, who each earned from Palean the sum of five thousand dollars-- in cash.

CHAPTER XIII. NEARER MY GOD TO THEE

The sound of the slowing train awakened Allen, who woke up Palean, who in turn telephoned Chris King in his cabin that they were soon to arrive in the Windy City. "Oh my God, dude, what a good sleep!" exclaimed Palean. "I feel like a daisy!"

At breakfast, Peter, Allen, and Gabe appeared in their bell bottoms, freshly laundered, and unstarched, and in a simple ceremony they were each awarded by Palean a green key "to heal the lifelong scar of expulsion."

"Jesus Christ, how many of those things do you have?" spouted Chris King.

"Just enough," laughed Palean.

Palean then summoned Captain Wright, who exchanged warm jocular pleasantries with the former stowaways, to their relief and delight.

"Captain," said Palean, "I want you and the crew to take a day off, starting after breakfast is cleared."

"Oh, Master Palean, God bless you, sir! They'll be wantin' to attend Mass, they will, oh, bless you sir," said the gallant captain as he bowed out.

Just then, the steward entered and handed Chris King a telegram. "Shall I wait for a reply, sir?" he asked.

"I'll ring you if we need you, Steward, thank you." As he departed, Chris King opened the wire. "It's for you and me, Palean! It's from Kerry Dutton Taft!"

"Kerry Dutton!" Palean exclaimed. "How the hell does he know where we are or who we are?" he asked in shock. "And what does he want?"

"He says, 'I like you fellows and I want to give you some information. This day. Meet me at Temple building at four o'clock this afternoon, in the sky chapel, 30th floor.' Hmmm. Something about that note seems familiar."

"What could he want to tell us?" asked Palean.

"We'll find out at four!" laughed Chris King.

"How far is the Temple from the depot?" asked Palean.

"Here it is," said Peter, who had already pulled down the proper volume from the Britannica. "One half mile; you just walk across over the Chicago River and bang, there you are! 'Built in 1924, it's the world's tallest building since Met Life Insurance was built in New York in 1909. And the world's tallest church. Twenty floors are offices and thirty-five are steeple, which includes the parsonage and the Sky Chapel, a penthouse on the 30th floor.'"

"Thirtieth floor! Inside a steeple! Jesus!" exclaimed Allen.

"I think I might be a philologist when I grow up," commented Peter, replacing the volume on the shelf.

"IF you grow up!" replied Allen laughing. "So far, I've seen no evidence of growth," putting his hand atop Peter's tousled locks.

"Well, now we can plan the day," said Palean. "First of all, you guys," indicating the sailors, "you guys are not going with us to the chapel."

"You're not on the invite list," added Chris King to allay their evident disappointment.

"Now, it's nine o'clock, and the train's stopping, so we're here," continued Palean. "Let's all go to the flickers until it's four. My treat!"

This suggestion was joyfully accepted by the other four, but Chris King was especially excited. "I just remembered, Palean, I have the pass that Mr. Eastman gave me that lets me and four others in free to any theatre equipped by Peter Clark!"

"Wow! That's great you remembered," said Palean, admiring the pass card.

So after Chris King had consulted the Britannica for a list of local Clark houses, the team, now five strong, headed out for the flickers and were able to attend full stage shows and pictures (or portions thereof) at the Belmont, Granada, Chicago, Harding, Harris, Selwyn, Oriental, Riviera, Senate, State, Rivoli, Uptown, Marbro, UA and Sheridan, the latter three brand new. Satiated, the triplets headed back to the train as the Palean and Chris King marched to their rendezvous with Kerry Dutton.

As the orphans entered upon the tastefully opulent Grand Foyer of the Temple, they were directed to the express elevator marked '30 Sky Chapel' by an acolyte, suitably attired. Palean tipped him liberally, and the orphans entered the cab, so small that the boys were almost

wedged together. When Chris King reached down to the control panel, his eyes lit up.

"There's nowhere to go but up, old buddy!" he exclaimed, pressing "Up" on the control panel.

"Did you leave your brain on the train by any chance?" asked Palean, but by now their ears were beginning to pop from the increasingly rapid ascent of the car, and all conversation ceased.

When the car finally slowed, found its mark, and the doors parted, the orphans received a blast of mechanically-generated high-velocity ice-cold air right in the face.

"Cooled by refrigeration!" cried Palean.

The room was almost pitch black, save for the dim light of faux blue skies up above which proclaimed this was the Chapel. But what was brightly lit was another elevator car just like theirs, directly opposite.

For all the thousand scenarios that the mutual mental pair had cogitated, nothing could prepare them for the sight that greeted their eyes.

Lying on a huge stack of rusty brown iron weights was none other than Kerry Dutton Taft, shirtless, soaking wet, bound and gagged and seated in a tub of ice. In this hellish meat locker, he was blue and shivering. Huge standing fans were blowing the fiercely ice-cold wind straight at the hapless youth at a tremendous velocity. Kerry Dutton Taft was being frozen to death.

The orphans rushed to the car and scaling the weights, they ripped the gag from the mouth of Kerry Dutton. "It's a trap! Get out, it's a trap!" he screamed.

"We're all getting out!" said Chris King as he and Palean began to untie the lad. But just then came the sound of a disembodied voice.

"No one's getting out, my friends."

"That's the voice of Roger Taft!" both orphans exclaimed at once.

"In three seconds, this elevator car shall freefall thirty flights to the street."

Before the boys could move, the doors slammed shut and latched. The voice continued, "I have thoughtfully placed three and one-quarter tons of iron weight beneath your feet to accelerate your descent so greatly

that you will be flatter than the pancakes they sell on the Loop, the Loop, the Loop..."

"It's a Victrola record!" exclaimed Palean.

And with a tremendous thud from up above, the tiny elevator car began to free-fall thirty floors.

"Count down, now, will you Palean?" asked Chris King as if this was an everyday event. "I estimate 4.33 seconds, and for your sakes, I hope I'm not wrong."

"Four... three... two..." counted Palean.

The instant that Palean counted "two", Chris King snapped his fingers with one hand, while with the other, he reached behind his back and depressed the green "Emergency Stop" button.

With the slightest of bumps, the car instantly, gently, and rapidly decelerated and within a few precarious seconds, the car hit its mark exactly, the doors opened automatically, and boys found themselves in the Grand Foyer.

"Holy Basilica! How did you do that?!" exclaimed Palean.

"Later, Palean! First let's get this guy untied and out into the sunlight."

"Who are you?" cried Kerry Dutton. "You saved my life!"

"I'm Palean Packard the third and that's Chris King, and that's what we do lately-- save lives. Not let's get you out in the warmth."

As they staggered through the majestic Grand Foyer into the hot afternoon sun, both Palean and Chris King immediately lit up. The frigid Kerry Dutton lagged behind the orphans as he received supplication in the form of a hot towel from the hands of an acolyte.

"How the frigging hell did you know we wouldn't crash, Chris King? I demand to know," asked Palean when they were out of earshot.

"Because the second we stepped into the first elevator, I saw the 'Peter Clark' name on the control panel. His emergency stop invention can halt even a free fall, gracefully and quietly, as you have you have just witnessed.

"And according to the Britannica, which I checked before we left, the car will ALWAYS fall at the same speed, no matter the weight, no matter the distance," explained Chris King. "So Roger Taft flunks science."

Palean's mouth was agape with wonder.

Chris King continued, "I figured out I had 4.33 seconds to depress the emergency stop pushbutton, and fortunately for you, I was correct. Peter Clark rules! The best possible conclusion!" he laughed.

In a whisper to Palean, he added, "The Peter Clark emergency stop would have automatically engaged without me pressing the button, so we were never in danger. But don't tell Kerry Dutton," he giggled.

"Who did this to you, Kerry Dutton?" asked Palean, when the somewhat warmer boy caught up.

"I don't know," said Kerry Dutton. "I was lured to the Chapel by a telegram and knocked to the floor before I ever saw my assailants!"

"We got a phony telegram, too!" exclaimed Chris King, who like Palean was astonished at the remarkable physical resemblance between Kerry Dutton Taft and Roger Taft, but was too polite to mention the fact. Both boys shared the Irish good looks common to many of the Taft clan.

"I was here to participate in a telegraphic swimming contest when I was summoned by telegram to the Temple Building on business for my great-uncle," explained Kerry Dutton. "You see, my uncle owns this building."

"Are you going to tell us to go roll our hoop?" asked Palean.

"On other than private property?" chimed in Chris King.

"Oh no, my friends, I owe you my life! I have witnessed a miracle! Until I met you, my only friends were our servants. Even my uncle does not recognize my voice on the long-distance wire. I have no grandmothers," sighed Kerry Dutton. Spying their cigarettes, he added, "Jesus Christ, gimme one of them boys!"

Armed with a cigarette, Kerry Dutton produced a book of matches from his pocket, but they were soaking wet. Likewise, the matchbook Chris King offered was of no use.

"Hey!" cried Chris King suddenly. "My match book is wrong!"

"Huh?" asked Palean.

"Palean, you know I never carry matches with me since you always have a light," exclaimed Chris King, "but today I brought this one with me, the matchbook for the Sky Chapel. Except now it doesn't say 'Sky Chapel' anymore."

"The water, it's changed the matchbook!" said Palean, examining it closely. "The old ink is gone. This insignia looks like a bug, and it says 'M.O.S.T. in the town of W_____. Where Atlanta used to be.'"

"Where Atlanta used to be?" exclaimed Kerry Dutton.

Palean filled in Kerry Dutton about the fire and said, "and that's all we know."

"Not quite," interjected Chris King, pulling the *Chicago Trib* from out of the back of his soccer trunk. "Look at what it says for the high temperature: 746 degrees in Atlanta! That's hot!"

"Man, I'm COLD, and I need a drink. Where can we get a drink? I mean a REAL drink!" Kerry Dutton puffed, looking up and down the street like a veteran smoker.

Chris King put his arm over Kerry Dutton's shoulder and started walking him towards the train car.

"You're a changed personage, Kerry Dutton. You've been humbled."

Before Kerry Dutton could speak, Palean said, "My train car, towards which we are now walking, is out of service until tomorrow morning. You shall be our guest for tonight and you can bunk with me in the only cabin with a fireplace. But right now, let's get to the depot so you can get a hot tub and thaw out!"

"But the servants!" cried Chris King. "They're off for the evening."

"Not all," laughed Palean. "Standby girl is always there, and she will take care of our food, drinks, bedding, carrying coal, lighting fires, laundry, and anything else we need."

"Ah, the luck of the Irish!" smiled Chris King. "While you're aboard, new friend Kerry Dutton, we shall treat you like a king!" he continued. "On Palean's train, there's a complete speak, with a bar, barstools, and a blind blonde pianist."

"We have drugs, too," offered Palean with an arch sparkle in his eye.

With a new contented look on his face and a glow upon his cheeks, Kerry Dutton murmured, "That sounds like Heaven."

After Kerry Dutton and company had been bathed, fed and revivified, all the boys gathered in the speak to hear what Palean had to say. "Before we begin this evening's unbridled festivities, we want to bring Kerry Dutton and the triplets up to date on the activities of the nefarious Roger Taft."

"So that's it," said Chris King after Palean had concluded his briefing. "We have the clue to W_____, but we don't know how to get there."

"Could it be the Paradise Theatre in Kokomo, Indiana?" asked Gabe, out of the blue.

"The Kokomo Paradise!" exclaimed Chris King.

"We found this on the floor in your cabin," said Peter, displaying the well-worn issue of *Physical Culture*. "See? This ad here, you might have missed it because the pages were stuck together. Right there, it's circled three times."

"Paradise Theatre, Kokomo Indiana, for rent."

"That's exactly what Peter Clark said!" cried Palean excitedly. "'Paradise shall be yours!' We're on the right track!"

Peter produced the Britannica so all could study the map.

"I'd like very much to go with you," said Kerry Dutton, who had listened to the briefing with eager concentration. "But in the morning, I must take the train down to Cincinnati to report to my uncle. As soon as I can, I will rejoin your band!"

"And in the morning, when Captain Wright returns, we shall travel to Kokomo!" exclaimed Palean. "With any luck, we should get there by midnight!"

And so these plans became realties in the early morning as the orphans and triplets bid a fond adieu to Kerry Dutton, the proud recipient of a green key "for humility." And now there were eight.

CHAPTER XIV. THE KOKOMO PARADISE

When the midnight moon glided out from behind the clouds, Palean, Chris King, and the triplets could see the outline of the huge Kokomo Paradise Theatre. Not another soul was on the street.

"Wow!" cried Chris King as he spied the magnificent vertical sign and peacocked marquee notifying all that they had arrived at "Paradise."

"I played this house in vaudeville!" he cried. "Paradise is where I saved the show and got my St. Christopher medal!" The boys all stood in silent respect for this actor, forced from the stage at the ripe age of nine by the Geary laws.

"Look it says,'For sale' on the marquee," said Gabe. "'Closed until further notice.'"

"You guys go around back, maybe you can find a window to get in," suggested Palean. "And here are some special spectacles to disguise you," handing each boy a pair.

"Now we're highly inconspicuous in our green crosses, new glasses, long tresses, and sailor suits!" quipped Peter as the threesome donned the glasses and ran furtively down the side of the hulking edifice and out of sight.

"Look up there!" cried Chris King, "There's a light on in the projection room!"

"How can we get up there? It must be eight stories high!" said Palean.

"Look," said Chris King. "See that truck parked on the side street? We can climb up on top, then jump across to the low roof of the retail store, the climb up those iron ladders fastened to the side of the building!"

"Lead on MacDuff!" exclaimed Palean, and within a few minutes, the orphans found themselves on a metal platform outside the open window of the projection room, with a grand view of Wildcat Creek and downtown Kokomo.

"Be cool," warned Chris King. "Sometimes these projectionists can be skittish."

"About climbing in their window at midnight? Oh, perish the thought!" grinned Palean as he followed Chris King through the opening into the noisy room.

"Are you the projectionist?" yelled Palean once the orphans were upright again.

But the diminutive man in the long white coat bending over the rewind table could not hear him over the machine noise.

"He can’t hear you, he's showing a movie!" cried Chris King, who knew the workings of a projection room. "Look through that portal."

"I can see the screen!" cried Palean.

"Picture sheet, not screen" corrected Chris King as he leaned down and peered through the portal with his best pal.

"He's showing *Angel Eyes*. The death scene!" cried Chris King.

"But there's no one down there to see it!" exclaimed Palean in astonishment.

"He's showing a film to no audience in a closed theatre and you're worrying about breaking and entering?" asked Chris King.

They stood and looked at each other, smiling. "I know how to get him," cried Palean, snapping his fingers.

"FOCUS!" he screamed to the back of the uniformed operator, who jumped in automatic response and in an instant was peering through the portal at the far projection machine and making the unnecessary adjustments.

As he worked, he yelled in apology, "Sorry, very sorry, I was rewinding."

"Lousy house tonight, eh buddy?" yelled Chris King in his best union stagehand voice.

"Tuesdays are always lousy," the man replied with a slight Canadian accent and for the first time, he faced the orphans.

"Sweet spirits of Nitre! You're Beaver Bither!" exclaimed Palean as his eyes grew wide. "The famous child film star! Look Chris King, it's frigging Beaver Bither, right before our very eyes!"

"I am NOT Beaver Bither!" angrily replied the man who was a boy. "I am Mr. LaFlamme, the Chief Projectionist Apprentice," swallowing the last word.

"Sure you are!" said Palean. "I'd know you anywhere, and me and Chris King here, we weren't born yesterday and we know a friggin' movie star when we see one, pardon my French your highness. We saw you in *Hot Cookies*, *Hot Water*, *Radio Bug*, *Scrambled Eggs*, *Lickety-split* and *Air Pockets*!"

"And when you died in *Angel Eyes*," gushed Chris King, "your acting was credited with the production of tears sufficient to cause the great Mississippi Flood of 1927--"

"Which fortunately was averted," interjected Palean.

"And we know," continued Chris King, "they say in the magazines that you're too pretty to be a boy, but I can tell from your manly stride and manly voice that ARE a boy-- one hundred percent! Even your name is manly-- no one with a lisp can pronounce it. What a relief!" he finished, in relief.

"I was never in a picture with a monkey," replied the beautiful movie star as he lit up a Camel. And indeed he was a heavenly thing to behold, with a tangled mane of thick gold-flecked curls setting off his soft chiseled features and eyes which emitted a radiance most people thought not possible.

"It is OK to smoke here in the projection room?" asked Chris King. "I mean, right next to the film?"

"Perfectly fine my boy, just an old wives' tale," exhaled the operator, leaning against a sign which read "Smoking Positively Forbidden."

"Why are you in Kokomo dressed as an apprentice brain surgeon, for Christ's sakes?" exclaimed Palean. "You should be back in Hollywood and up on that silver screen, bringing hope and joy to millions four times a day, but not on Sundays unless it's a benefit."

"Maybe this will answer your question," replied the weary star, removing a copy of a two-week old *Variety* from the drawer of the rewind table. "Just read the headline," he said.

"'BEAVER BITHER WASHED UP AT AGE 13-- WILL PROBABLY NEVER WORK AGAIN'" read Chris King. "'And plus'" read the subtitle, "'reduced from five thousand a week to nothing and all his four million dollar earnings to date have been frittered away by his evil foster aunt Cornelia in Philly.'"

"Wow, that's a bad break!" cried Palean. "Who decides these things?"

"I was luckier than most," replied Beaver. "That's the new California Freckled Boy Actors Law, it says they have to print a headline in Variety-- in wood, so you can't miss it-- that tells you the day you're

washed up and your money's all gone. Otherwise, it could take YEARS for a boy to find out he was no longer loved, no longer worshipped, no longer adored." Like Chris King, Beaver Bither was a fine actor and for once he had been given some lines.

"I was treated like a king, and the directors adored me. Once I found a diamond bracelet in my broiled trout. My mother sold me by the hour.

"But now, I'm reduced to living-- here!" continued Beaver as he raised his arms to the sky. "I live in a projection room. At least it has good ventilation," exhaled the fallen star, stubbing out his cigarette in a can on the rewind table. "And I can jump down from that window and sun bathe on the roof, any time I choose. I can do that sort of thing now, you see, because I KNOW my agent won't be calling me!" And with that, the poor star burst into a flood of manly tears, louder even than the din of projection machine number two. "Thirteen was the best year of my life!" he wept.

"Hey, we can give you a much superior place to live, with a tub, and I mean right now!" exclaimed Palean, holding the weeping boy. "Free, and with board, until your situation is--"

"Corrected," inserted Chris King.

"We want you to join our merry band. You would be our ninth member!"

"Really?" asked Beaver Bither with a trace of hope in his eyes as he wiped away his tears with a sheet of lubricated lens cleaner.

"REEL CHANGE!" yelled Chris King. The distracted projectionist scurried to make the change.

"Friggin' Beaver Bither!" exclaimed Palean to Chris King. "This must be our lucky day!"

"Am I crazy or do I hear organ music?" asked Chris King.

Peering through the portal, Palean reported, "There's no one at the console. What next?" he asked as Beaver rejoined the boys.

Smoking again, the newly-optimistic star threw his still lit match into the tiny ash can on the table.

Just then, there was a tremendous explosion that shook the booth. *KA-BOOM!*

The room was plunged into darkness as the organ music ceased.

CHAPTER XV. THE SECRET APARTMENT

Almost simultaneous with the explosion were a series of terribly loud slams as the ten solid steel fire shutters crashed to the bottom of their tracks, closing off all openings into auditorium.

"It's the fire shutters!" cried Chris King as he fumbled for and located the main switch for the booth worklights. Happily for the boys, the smoke-filled room was now no longer in darkness. They all immediately rushed to the booth entrance door.

"It's sealed shut!" exclaimed Palean, his shoulder to the door. An inspection of the back exit revealed a similar bleak condition.

"Your faces are as black as ink!" cried Beaver Bither to the orphans.

"Well, yours is as black as the ace of spades!" laughed Chris King, as the boys wiped away the soot.

"What's all that noise?" asked Palean.

"That's the exhaust fans, they kick in when the fire shutters close. See how the smoke is almost all gone?" asked Chris King.

"We're being suffocated!" cried Palean. "We've got to get out of here while we still have enough air to breathe! How do we get out?" he asked the panic-stricken Beaver Bither.

"Oh, I don't know!" he cried. "In Hollywood I always had a driver!"

"What's in here?" asked Chris King of the boy.

"That's the rheostat room," replied the trembling mess.

"Why is the door locked?" asked Chris King.

"My film prints are in there! All my scenes and sixty two-reelers," Beaver Bither added proudly. "What a treasure!"

"Well unlock the door, please sir! Maybe there's a way out," begged the unbelieving Palean.

And indeed there was.

"Look!" cried Chris King as he pointed to a hatch in the ceiling. "There's a legend, I can just barely read it. 'Emergency Hatch to Paradise Apartment.' That sounds good enough for me," and he started up the short steel ladder.

"Wait!" cried Beaver Bither. "We must take my film prints or I shall stay here and drown along with them," he said somewhat dramatically.

"Very well, hand them up," said Chris King, and with ten fireproof film canisters in hand, the boys climbed up into the smokeless and air-filled attic, across a neat plaster catwalk, and down again into an abandoned but palatial, circular and sunken deluxe apartment.

Chris King snapped his fingers. "I've got it! This is the apartment of Sandy Paradise, who built the theatre then suddenly disappeared. A lot of theatres have secret apartments like this for purposes of seduction, always with windows which face the lighted vertical sign and a portal so they can watch their show. See?" he asked, pointing to the large closed opening in the auditorium wall.

"How do we get out of the building?" asked Palean, looking out the window over the marquee. "That's a four-story drop!"

"Look here!" cried the trained voice of silent film star Beaver Bither, standing by a small doorway at the far end of the flat.

The orphans rushed to his side. "There's another legend," reported the movie star.

"'Chute to stage in case I want to scream at someone,'" read Chris King.

"If nothing else, this place is well-labeled," observed Palean with admiration.

"No wonder!" said Chris King. "'Chute by Peter Clark'," he said, laughing as he read the small print.

"American Knowhow!" cried Palean, overjoyed.

"But wait!" said Chris King, all of a sudden. "What about the triplets? What happened to the triplets?"

Reader, let us turn back the clock to before the explosion.

At about the same time the orphans had reached the projection room, the sailors had located an open window in the dressing room tower.

"Hey, we gotta be careful!" warned the taller Allen to Gabe and Peter. "That Roger Taft guy is probably in there."

"We gotta also remember to hope for the best possible outcome in case anything bad should befall us. Remember? That's what Palean and Chris Kind said last night? The best possible outcome. And then he forced us to pray."

They climbed in through the window and reached the darkened stage, illuminated only by the flickers of the projected film on the rear of the picture sheet.

"They're running a movie in a closed theatre! What gives?" asked the always inquisitive Peter.

"Let's split up and scope it out" suggested Gabe, and after a brief reconnaissance, the boys regrouped in the stage right wing around a huge organ console. "There's no one out there," reported Allen. "Hey, this thing is an organ!"

"I wonder if it works!" exclaimed Peter, the best pianist of the three. "Remember the night we played the one in the church?"

"Jeepers, this is a much better organ, not at all like the church. Look at all the beautiful colors!" said Allen as he removed the large and dusty canvas dust cover.

The sailors sat down on the bench with Allen in the middle because he could best reach the swell pedals, which he began to read out loud. "'I, II, III, CRESC.' Ah, crescendo, we'll be needing you!" he exclaimed.

"But what's that one?" asked Peter, referring to the shiny round foot button next to the crescendo pedal. "It says S-f-or-zando. How the hell are you supposed to say an 's' before an 'f'?" he asked.

"Fast," suggested Gabe, "like Italian, *Sforz-ando*!" as he located the organ start button and pressed it down. From the silence of the auditorium, they could hear the whoosh of air as all the pneumatic devices in the chambers got used to themselves and the swell shades closed tight.

"It plays!" exclaimed Peter, ecstatically sounding a chord. "What shall we play? What's fitting?"

While they pondered this question, the sailors pulled out the old bong and each took long and healthy hits. Then they lit cigarettes because nothing becomes a theater organist more than playing while smoking.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Peter. "'Hall of the Mountain King', by Edvard Grieg-- from Troldhaugen!"

And with that, the three sailors launched into the scary two-and-a-half minute tune, perfect for a scary theatre, with Peter and Gabe splitting up the four manuals between them and Allen pre-setting and playing heavy pedal.

Louder and louder they played until almost at the tag, when over the din Allen roared, "I'm going *sforzando* now!" and they all laughed.

Just as Allen's foot hit the silver switch, *KA-BOOM!* There was a huge explosion that shook the entire block occupied by the massive theatre.

When the smoke finally began to clear, the first thing the triplets noticed was that the organ console was gone, and a pile of smoldering ashes was all that remained.

The triplets themselves were unharmed, but with the exception of their new wristwatches, they were now completely buck-naked, their clothes literally blown off their tanned bodies.

The three mids burst out laughing.

"This is good shit!" exclaimed Peter, offering another puff all around.

Just as the triplets had begun to wonder what to do about clothes and eating, a swarm of extraordinarily lovely and unchaperoned thirteen-year-old Girl Scouts appeared from out of nowhere, bearing the banner "Paradise Explosion Relief." Spying the boys standing in a nudist row before the ruins of the organ, with much noise and many giggles, the girls surrounded the triplets and showered them with affection.

These fifteen-year-old boys were from nice towns, like Washington Depot, but now they felt as if they were meat on display in a butcher's window, free for all to see and touch-- and it was a good feeling.

The Scout to triplet ratio was four-to-one, and the unannounced visitors made their selection with a vengeance. However, because pornography is not within the scope of this work, we will simply say that a good time was had by all before the party was ended when a shrill whistle summoned the troop back from whence they strayed.

"Wow, talk about best possible outcome!" exclaimed Allen, as he lit up.

"What are we going to do about clothes?" asked Peter after a suitable number of cigarettes. "We probably shouldn't walk back to the train like this."

"Voila!" exclaimed Gabe, as he dramatically pulled from behind his back three sashes he stole from the Scouts. Donning their new outfits proudly, the triplets had successfully made the transition from sailors to nudists to lost boys.

Exhausted, but nevertheless starving, the triplets attacked with gusto the box lunches and milk left behind by the girls in the frenzy of the moment. Gabe especially enjoyed a Happy Meal. And then, like in a fairy tale, they all fell asleep in a neat pile on the stage deck.

Quite suddenly, Palean, Chris King, and Beaver Bither appeared next to the triplets as if they had been shot out of a canon. Ten film canisters glided to the floor behind them.

"Oh my God, they're dead!" exclaimed Palean, as he and Chris King rushed toward the lifeless triplets.

"Just asleep!" said Chris King as he shook them gently. "How could anyone sleep through an explosion that blew off their clothes? Ah, here's how," and he produced the little bong Peter always carried.

"Let's get out of here, guys!" cried Palean as he shook them awake.

"Oh, my friggin' Christ! It's Beaver Bither! In person!" screamed the triplets all at once when they saw the star standing before them, like some kind of angel.

"No autographs, please!" said the angel, as he pulled a fountain pen from his breast pocket.

"Yes, yes, yes!" yelled Chris King impatiently. "It's Beaver Bither! Now, PLEASE can we get going? Ya'll can chat later! Each of you, grab a film can!" he commanded.

As they hurried to the stage entrance, the boys could see that the life of the theatre had been terminated by the explosion, one entire side wall of the auditorium was gone, the balcony had collapsed, the ceiling shredded, and huge heavy sections of plaster and lath hanging like the sword of Damocles.

"Something isn't right here," said Chris King. "I thought this was the house I played and saved the show, but nothing looks familiar and the switchboard-- it should be on stage left!"

"Can we do the tour later?" asked Palean. "Let's split this joint before the other shoe drops!" he cried, taking Chris King by the arm.

So, with Chris King leading the way, Palean, Beaver Bither, and the triplets got the hell out of Paradise.

CHAPTER XVI. MEETING THE STAGE CREW

After handing over the triplets and Beaver Bither to the train servants, with their tender Irish ways, the orphans guzzled a Publix-Paradise ginger ale and walked briskly back to the theatre.

"This time Roger Taft has gone too far, blowing up a theatre!" said Palean.

"But only partly blown, and no one hurt! What diabolic game is she playing?" asked Chris King.

Upon their return to the Paradise, the orphans did not have to search long to find the next clue. For on the floor right at the stage entrance hall was a handbill printed in sensational type.

"Children's Burlesque Show starring Phoebe-- Paradise screening room-- Stage Door, Third Floor, by invite only. Peculations Galore!"

"Jiggers!" exclaimed Chris King. "It has to be the same Phoebe! Who else would peculate in a children's burlesque show?"

"Right!" said Palean. "How do we get there? What is a screening room?"

"That's where the orchestra rehearses with the movie before they show it. Here's the elevator," said Chris King.

"Let's take the stairs, if you don't mind," said Palean as he started up the three flights.

"Scared of elevators, Palean? Scairdy cat!" laughed Chris King.

"Yes, I am!" admitted Palean.

As they stepped onto the third floor landing, they could smell a strange potent odor, like opium. "Man, that ginger ale really hits the spot," commented Palean as he let fly a loud expression of pleasure from his mouth. "Excuse me!" he laughed.

From behind a closed door down the hall came a return expression of pleasure, then two, then three, all loud and penetrating, professional, such as one might hear after devouring a very fine meal.

"Who's in there?" Chris King demanded, shaking the doorknob of the locked room. The only reply was more expressions of pleasure emitting from the mouth.

Putting their shoulders forward, both orphans ran at the door and with a tearing of metal, it burst open. To their horror, they saw three female stand-up department store mannequins, their bases anchored firmly to the cement floor, and to each of these dolls endowed with mature body parts was hog-tied a boy about their age, face-to-face against these lifelike dummies. The boys were also gagged, which explained why they could only communicate by expressions of pleaure.

At once, the orphans rushed to open the windows and allow the strange smell to escape. Palean located the source, an incense burner, and he gave it a good hosing with a soda acid extinguisher out in the corridor.

Only then did Palean and Chris King rip off the boy's gags. All three began to speak at once.

"Thank you so much for saving us!" cried the carrot-topped boy. "I'm Penrod!"

Introductions were made all around, and besides Penrod, the carpenter with a photographic memory, there was blonde Kimo, the electrician, and shaggy-haired Xemo, the flyman. All three were handsome and manly, with Germanic features.

After a liberal dosage of ice cold ginger ale had been given the three boys, they emitted some excellent expressions of pleasure, and Palean said, "It's your expressions of pleasure that saved you, Penrod."

"Some say it's a mating call,” said Penrod, “but we use it for signaling. We are-- or were-- the stage crew."

"We came back to search for clues about the explosion after we rescued Beaver Bither," said Chris King, "and thank God we did!"

"How did you get here?" Palean asked.

Penrod was the lead and the most talkative, and he related their sad saga breathlessly.

"We've only been here two weeks. You see, we are all first cousins of the exact same age, fourteen, and we live with my evil step-sister. She gave me an ad for the job here because we are on the stage crew at out high school," he boasted.

"We knew it was a union house, but we thought maybe we could get in because we're all related," chimed in Kimo.

"First of all," continued Penrod, "we were suspicious why a theatre that was closed needed a crew. But there was no one to ask. We never met the man who hired us. He only left us instructions and our pay. The first day, we explored the whole empty place from top to bottom, and that's how WE discovered Beaver Bither.

"Then a note was left telling us to report here to the private screening room, and we began work as the crew for the twice-nightly kid's burlesque show with Phoebe and three beautiful Scandinavian girl strippers right about our age. What they did to Phoebe and those poor girls you would not believe!" cried Penrod, shaking his head ruefully. "We were told we couldn't say anything to anyone!"

"But that's not the worst," added Xemo.

"Right," agreed Penrod as he drew a breath. "On the first day, there were three contracts left for each of us to sign and we did. Then two nights ago, we found out why. Phoebe and the other girls had somehow escaped and the lady director, Miss Fortune--"

"Miss Fortune!" the orphans both said at once, exchanging glances.

"--Miss Fortune told us we had to be in the show, that we had to pretend to be girls!"

"Flapper vampires in disguise!" exclaimed Xemo.

"And to strip!" cried Kimo. "Actually," he continued, "since the girls were so young, we were pretty convincing."

"We knew their routines from watching, so we just copied them," added Xemo.

"At first, we refused," interrupted Penrod, "but that was when Miss Fortune showed us what we had signed-- articles of indentured servitude. My evil stepsister had sold us out in exchange for a pair of season tickets."

"For life?" exclaimed Palean in wonder at this interesting arrangement.

"For seven years. But Miss Fortune said because we had had carnival relations, that fact would be entered in our permanent record unless we obeyed her every command."

"Your permanent record!" exclaimed Chris King. "That's so... permanent!"

Kimo burst in, "And then tonight, we came here to find the room padlocked, shut down by the Kokomo Ladies League. Before she left, Miss Fortune tied us up here."

"But listen to what she told us!" said Penrod. "She said we were *have-beens*.

"I corrected her politely, 'you mean has-beens,' I said."

"'No!' she replied," continued Penrod, perfectly imitating the wicked voice of Miss Fortune. "'You are *have-beens* because between what you saw and did, your morals *have been* corrupted! Your only escape from shame is death!'"

"We didn't know what to think!" exclaimed Kimo as the crew boys' dramatic retelling reached its climax.

"We suddenly realized," said Penrod, "that our morals HAD BEEN corrupted and there was no reversing the fact. We never heard of anyone whose morals were uncorrupted. We had inadvertently traded our spiritual virginity for moral shipwreck and ruin."

"Wow!" exclaimed Chris King.

"Tough break!" added Palean.

"We just want to be real boys: healthy, natural, honest, and unspoiled," said Kimo, breathing heavily.

The orphans were so stunned by the turn of events that they had forgotten to untie the crew boys from their female mates, against whom they had continually struggled during the whole preceding conversation. "Could you please untie us now?" asked Penrod politely.

"Oh, sorry!" cried Palean, and he and Chris King made short work of the boys' release. The crew all wore white mechanics overalls, now dirty and drenched in perspiration. "Have you eaten anything?" asked Palean in concern.

"Oh yes, we enjoyed a hearty meal of fish before we were bound, gagged, and left to die," said Penrod.

"We could use some fresh air," added Kimo.

"Where are my manners?" asked Palean as he handed out cigarettes all around.

"And then his sister sold us out, the mothers shut the show down, and the girls has done plum disappeared!" spouted Kimo angrily, his conversation becoming more relaxed in the presence of new friends.

"Oh, why can't babies be brought by the stork?" asked Palean, pounding his hand into his fist. "Orphans don’t have such a bad lot after all."

"Seems like the only good mothers are grandmothers," sighed Chris King who never yet had either.

"We were born," said Xemo, "almost at the same time on the same day at Good Samaritan's, and from that day on, we've hung out together and never had any other friends."

"Who needs 'em?" asked Kimo.

"Still, we hadn't had too much experience with girls before this," said Xemo. "I dated a girl for a while, but I realized when I went to kiss her that she looked just like Kimo, so I got embarrassed and broke it off."

"My only girlfriend hanged herself," said Kimo. "And Penrod, he helped a girl at the girl's school and then she came to his school, uninvited and she..."

"She tried to take my boyhood," said Penrod.

"Gee, I hate to change the subject, but we've got a big mystery to solve," interrupted Chris King. He and Palean filled in the boys on all the details of their adventures to date. "And the only clue we have left is this matchbook," he said, showing it to Penrod.

"'M.O.S.T. in the town of W_____. Where Atlanta used to be,'" read Penrod.

"Say, I've seen that bug on the matchbook before!" exclaimed Xemo. "It's in the backstage elevator-- the top floor. But it's locked off!"

"Didn’t you see it when you rode up?" asked Penrod.

"We took the stairs!" laughed Chris King.

The crew grabbed the orphans and ran to the lift. "There it is!" exclaimed Kimo.

With great trepidation, Palean pressed the button adjacent to the bug. But nothing happened.

"See, it's locked off," said Xemo. Chris King then pressed the next-to-top floor button, for 6, Broadcast Room. Upon inspection, however, the boys discovered that the fire stair ended at 6, and there was no visible access to the floor above.

"The only choice is the elevator," said Penrod, "like we told you!"

Then Palean had a great idea. "Chris King, try your key in that lock!"

And lo and behold, the green key which encircled the neck of Chris King precisely fitted the floor lock, and the elevator rumbled up one, two, perhaps three stories before if ground to a halt.

"I thought we were going through the friggin' roof!" exclaimed a relieved Palean when the car finally stopped.

"We did go through the roof, Palean! Look!" said Chris King as he peered through the open car door. "It's a roof garden, and we're backstage!"

The boys found themselves in the most wondrous place they had ever seen, brilliantly illuminated by the full moon. The sound of exotic night birds and insects filled the air like visitors from another world.

"A roof garden! Holy Mary, mother of God!" exclaimed Palean.

"We're outside!" exclaimed Kimo, jumping up and down like a cowboy.

"This elevator must have been the way the actors from downstairs got up here for the late show," said Chris King. "There must be other elevators for the patrons in the front lobby, maybe two or more." Then Chris King stepped to center stage.

"This is it! This is where I played! Everything is half size!" he exclaimed. "I was only half-sized, so it makes sense, and the switchboard-- how tiny-- is on stage left, like I remember! This is it!"

It was immediately obvious to the boys that they were standing on a special stage, and they ran hither and thither to inspect it.

"It even has traps, look!" said Penrod, "Six of them!"

"There's a whole dormitory behind the stage! Five floors and two more elevators!" yelled Kimo as he and Xemo bounded back to the group. "Instead of dressing rooms, there are private suites, with tubs, ten to a floor! And behind that, a huge kitchen and servants' quarters!"

"What's this?" asked Palean, seeing a plaque on the switchboard.

He read: "'Hub Electric Company. Masonical Orphan's Secret Theatre.'"

"So that's what M.O.S.T. stands for!" exclaimed Chris King.

And then Kimo threw the big bull switch by the elevator. A million tiny lights appeared over the Art Noveau glass shed which covered the intimate table-and-chair cabaret seating like gossamer butterfly wings, and immediately beyond that were woods with hills, a river, and barely discernible in the distance was an old windmill-- working!

At that, all the boys ran out into the auditorium, through the shallow house, and over the wide wooden bridge that carried them into a different world.

"Let's make sure those lobby elevators are locked off!" suggested Palean as they reached the front of the building. The boys, working as an efficient team, located the equipment penthouses and verified that all the switches were off and fuses removed from the spooky premises.

"Let's get back to center circle," suggested Chris King, and none of the boys disagreed.

As they re-crossed the bridge, for the first time they viewed the magnificent Noveau proscenium arch of a stage which seemed to rise out of the floor from nowhere, like a chimera not quite in focus. That the whole place was shrouded in real foliage swaying in the warm breeze added to the marvelous illusion. And centered above the top of the arch was a giant green version of the bug they had seen on the matchbook and elevator.

"That's a scarab, I just realized!" cried Chris King.

"They symbolize resurrection. I read that somewhere," bragged Kimo.

All the boys got goosebumps.

"Do you think we’re in W_____?" Chris King whispered to Palean, standing close.

But before Palean could respond, Penrod cried, "I just heard something back there in the woods! Look, it's deer... three deer!"

All the boys watched the deer in stunned amazement.

"How did they get here? Who tends them?" asked Palean.

"We're not alone up here!" cried Kimo, grabbing hold of Xemo.

Just then, Penrod fell in a heap to the floor, his carrot-top a tangled mess about his face.

Kimo and Xemo rushed to the aid of their pal and after a second, they revived him.

"I guess I fainted!" said Penrod groggily.

"Can you walk?" ask Chris King, quite agitated.

The boys lifted Penrod to his feet and after a few tentative steps, he said, "Yeah, I'm OK now."

"Hey, you need a cigarette!" said Palean to Penrod, offering his pack.

"But it's your last one," objected Penrod politely.

"Oh, don't worry about that! I have cartons upon cartons back at the train, where you guys are going pronto. You guys need some rest and a hot bath."

"Where?" asked Penrod.

"On my private train down at the depot. It's a little crowded right now, but you guys can crash in my spacious cabin. That's where we took Beaver Bither!"

"A private train! What a night!" cried Kimo, and the three crew boys did an immoral dance, one of the routines they had recently learned.

"Can we PLEASE get the hell out of here, Palean?" asked Chris King, as he shoved the boys toward the elevator.

"It's two thirty o'clock," said Palean, consulting his wristwatch whose dial was illuminated by radium. "We'll rest up, then tomorrow the twins and Kerry Dutton will arrive, and we can all return tomorrow night at midnight with a big crew, refreshed and ready!"

"Then let's get out of here NOW!" cried Chris King, and the crew boys headed back down to the street after killing the houselights and making certain that the roof garden elevator stop was locked off.

Later that night, the crew boys, along with Beaver Bither, would be introduced into the magical world of Palean Packard and Chris King.

CHAPTER XVII. STRANGE SCENERY

It was a stately procession that made its way back to the roof the following night. Chris King and Palean marched at the lead, closely followed by the twins, the triplets, Kerry Dutton, Beaver Bither, and the stage crew, all uniformed in fitted collarless Arrow shirts, open at the neck and rolled up to the elbow, with smart khaki knickers and joyous knee socks, except for Palean and Chris King, who were dressed for soccer. In an elaborate ceremony, green keys had been presented to Beaver, Penrod, Kimo, and Xemo, who wore them proudly. The merry band now numbered a dozen!

An additional sleeping car had arrived, and now each boy had his own cabin and bath with room to spare. And beyond the dozen, at a respectful distance, new arrivals in the parade included Godfrey Daniel in full evening dress, the professor (guarded by Godfrey Daniel) and Dean Martineau the cat, held in the arms of the young and beautiful Mary Kitchen. All except Mary, Godfrey, and the professor were armed with a fountain pen flashlight. Generous provisions of food and other daily sustenance were hand-carried by five kitchen staff, four maids, and six laundresses, all smiling Irish gals.

"Gee, it's great to see all the guys in one place!" whispered Palean to Chris King, speaking of their crew. "And they get along great!"

"I know, just look at Beaver Bither! He's a real boy now with real friends," smiled Chris King.

"A real boy in fantasy world, perfect!" laughed Palean.

"I didn't know the professor was coming, but I guess the more the merrier," whispered Palean. "At least Godfrey Daniel has a tight leash on him."

"Well, we couldn't very well just leave him alone in Tampa!" admitted Chris King.

Before the group had left for Paradise, Chris King and Palean had given all the boys a through briefing and a plan for that night.

When the company arrived at the destination, they broke into pre-determined groups. The professor made his way to the dressing rooms, and the servants to their quarters, where they were ordered to remain.

"We've plenty of work to do back here to keep us busy," laughed the young Mary Kitchen with tiny freckles about her nose. "We have stock here to last us three weeks!"

"And all the linen must be aired," added Godfrey Daniel, who was in the process of serving the professor with an ice-cold Coca-Cola.

After the fire door between the stage and dorm had been rolled shut, Palean and Chris King led all the boys through a through moonlit tour of the rustic village, but not a trace of deer or other living creature could they find.

"I can't see Kokomo anymore down there," said Kimo. "I can't remember if I stood this close to the edge last night or not, but I swear I remember seeing the skyline."

"That's right," assented Palean.

"The clouds are different tonight, like the waves were at Tampa," said Chris King with a fond recollection.

"Kokomo is gone!" cried Penrod.

"You guys wait here," Palean said to the twins, triplets, Kerry Dutton, and Beaver Bither as they returned the back of the house. "Chris King and I and the crew are going to explore the scenery first, before we let any of youse guys get banged on the head by one of Roger Taft's booby traps."

The five boys assembled on the stage.

"Twenty different scenes," added Xemo, "each one with three portals and a backdrop. But you can't move the linesets even though the locks are fake. Look, for each set there's a cable running down to the trap room, to a motor, I guess."

"It's all controlled from this bronze Peter Clark Control Panel, right here," said Penrod, pointing with his cigarette.

Chris King was by now examining the half-size control panel and announced his discovery. "No labels except Scene One, Scene Two, In, Out, et cetera." He looked to Palean for guidance.

"And there's a lighting cue sheet for each scene," said Kimo examining a notebook at the small Hub switchboard.

"And also rolling set pieces with labels and floor spikes," exclaimed Penrod from the opposite wing upon making this additional discovery.

"Well let's start with One, and see what they got," Palean suggested as he offered a cigarette to his best pal.

"But do it professional!" added Chris King in excitement after he let out a drag. "This theatre is the perfect size for us to play in!"

"Huh?" asked Palean as Chris King bounded down the stairs to the house and took his place center, facing the stage, with his hands on his hips. He was in his element.

"You guys," said Chris King, pointing to the crew, "will drop the main rag, set the scene, set the stage, set the lights and THEN raise the main and we shall be out front to watch."

"Beaver Bither can run the lead frontlight with one of the others!" exclaimed Kimo, making sure that Beaver heard him out in the house.

"And I can run the other," cried a happy Kerry Dutton, looking his best. "I learned it at Taft. You learn a lot at Taft!" he cried.

And do me a favor, don’t rustle the drapes from behind." said Chris King to the stage crew. "Don’t forget nice curtain warmers. And remember to fade the houselights before you open the drape!"

Chris King and most of the others took first row tables, freshly-linened, along with the professor who had been summoned, and all were immediately served cocktails by the ever-present Godfrey Daniel. The newly-accomplished twins began to play an upbeat Wagner selection on piano and fiddle, completing the mystical mood.

Finally after much backstage commotion, the houselights dimmed and with a great musical flourish, the main rag rose to reveal a sight which brought horror to Chris King, Palean, and the professor.

"It's a complete replica of Mr. Eastman's office right after the Manns fell through the floor!" exclaimed Palean. "I can smell the buffet!"

The professor just stared in silence, his jaw agape.

"What the...?" asked Chris King. "Something sinister is afoot here."

By now, the threesome had climbed the steps to the stage, and they began examining the set minutely. "It's perfect in every detail," said Palean.

"The painted sets are continuously variable!" exclaimed Kimo. "The perspective changes as I move! It's IMPOSSIBLE!"

"Hold up, Palean, Kimo, the rest of you guys, listen," said Chris King in a crisp voice. "We're going to see just what we got here. Now, while I stand here, Palean, you take the per'fessor and get over there in the wings where you won't get hit by the drops, and the stage crew," he said, pointing, "you guys change the sets as I call them. Forget

closing the main drape, the fun is over. Do you comprehend? When I give the cue, first take out this set, then bring in number two. Go."

To the shock and consternation of the orphans and their colleagues, the setting was that of the WTAM radio transmitter, and then in rapid succession, Chris King called in the next set and the next, which depicted the all the various crime scenes, the Chicago Chapel, the Paradise downstairs booth, and the Paradise wing where the triplets had played the organ.

"What scene can possibly be next?" asked Palean in awe and wonder. For once, the orphans were totally baffled.

"Nothing to do but try it," said Chris King, directing his comment at flyman Xemo. "Take this out and bring in Number Six. Go."

CHAPTER XVIII. THE FALL

At that, the colorful stage lighting faded out and was replaced by harsh worklights, the scenery rose, but no scenery flew in to replace it. Instead, the six trapdoors in the stage floor lowered about a foot and then splitting center, they slid off out of sight. Chris King, unaware of the move, was facing downstage when the traps opened, and like a carefully rehearsed ballet in slow motion, he lost his balance, fell over backwards into the huge hole, and was gone.

"Stop the music! Stop the music!" cried Palean to the twins, who had long ago progressed into the loudest section of the Tannhauser Overture, and they and all the others rushed to the edge of the trap. "He's not down there!" cried Palean. "Chris King! Chris King!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

There was no response from the dimly-illuminated trap room, ten feet below. Where Chris King should have been after taking such a fall was only the cement floor of an empty room.

"Did you press any extra buttons, Xemo?" asked Palean, turning on the boy in despair.

"There are no extra buttons to punch except the green Emergency Stop which I pressed when you yelled to stop the music. All the others, once you punch them, they go dead, limp, they don't do anything," said Xemo on the verge of tears.

"I'm going down!" directed Palean as he scurried down the upstage left circular stair that led down to the substage and the trap room.

All twelve joined in the search, from top to bottom, but what they found was exactly nothing.

Once the company had reassembled on stage, the professor, as downhearted and awestruck as everyone else, called out the question.

"What are we going to say?" he asked. "What are we going to say?" he repeated as the idea sunk in with the boys.

"There are what," he counted, "twelve of us here? All twelve of us were witnesses, we all saw him fall, and we all know he's not where he should be if he fell. He's not here at all. What are we going to say, we witnessed a miracle? That Chris King just vanished into thin air like in a book? This is the real world!"

The professor began to weep. "In the real world, things like this don't happen, don't you understand? If we tell the truth, we'll be branded as insane, maybe as accessories..." Luke kindly handed the professor a box of Kleenex.

"We haven't tried Tampa," murmured George bravely.

"Well, we have to tell Mr. Eastman," said Palean, taking the situation in hand the best he could. "Chris King was like a son to him. Oh, and we should also inform the soccer team."

"Wire them immediately," Professor Zimmer exploded into action. "Bring in the next scene, scene seven!" he yelled with new-found confidence.

And to everyone's surprise, in the space downstage of the still open trap hole flew in a Western Union set. As Penrod rolled the Western Union desk unit onto its spikes, Palean began to compose a night wire. "What shall I write?" he asked.

"Wire that Miss Fortune, let her do the legwork," replied the professor. "Tell them all to get here as soon as possible. With their help, we're going to get to the bottom of this mystery!"

The boys with confidence bolstered by the professor's speeches began to stand tall and strike purposeful poses.

"Send it at double urgent rates!" added the professor.

"As Chris King would say," Palean announced as he handed in the telegram, "something is rotten in Denmark."

"May Miss Fortune be on our side!" cried the professor, and as he and the boys raised a war cry, they all took their exit upstage and into the dormitory.

Palean Packard had never felt so sad in his whole life. Alone on the stage, he lit a cigarette and mused to the empty auditorium. "Perhaps the professor is insane. He says, 'this is the real world,' but didn't I just send a phony telegram in this phony Western Union office? And to Miss Fortune, who isn’t even there? For God's sake!"

As Palean stared pensively down into the open trap, his mind re-shuffled, and now he felt he was gazing into a beautiful turquoise pool, the hard, unpainted cement floor ten feet below diffused by the scrim of his mind.

"Chris King wakes me in the morning with his laughter and he puts me to bed with his smile," thought Palean, holding back his tears. He is my best pal, and I WILL find him!"

All the while he pondered, Palean's cat was sniffing down into the void. Then he meowed loudly, which resounded, magnified and echoed, about that haunted stage.

"What's this?" Palean suddenly sputtered. "The cat is gone! Dean Martineau is gone!" He peered down into the hole.

"And he ain't down there either! My familiar took a leap into the hole. He took a leap. A leap. A leap of faith! And it worked!"

Reaching a sudden decision, Palean spun around and executing a perfect reverse swan dive, he plunged into the hole, just as Chris King and the cat had done before him. And then suddenly, he too was gone.

CHAPTER XIX. ROGER TAFT

Several hours passed before Palean regained consciousness, and to his delight, he found himself nose-to nose with Chris King, his best pal, who was alive. His second realization was that they were jammed in between two pillars and the two of them were tightly bound to one another with many loops of thick hemp rope.

"Chris King, I'm SO glad to see you! I never thought I'd see you again!" Tears of joy flowed down his hot cheeks. "How did you survive the fall? How did I? I jumped in too, after you."

"I don't know, Palean! One second I realized I was falling into this hole, and the next second, I'm somewhere else tied up. So then I fell asleep again, and suddenly you appear, tied up with me!"

"Where are we?" asked Palean.

"It looks like the trap room, but it's all dark and dingy," offered Chris King.

"Dude," said Palean, "you don't know what I went through to get here to save you!"

"Thank God you did!" announced Chris King. "Now, how are we going to get out of this mess? Maybe if I think hard enough..."

"You just gave me an idea, Chris King. You said you were once hypnotized, so let me have a go at it. Look into my eyes. I'm going to hypnotize you."

"Not now!"

"Yes, Chris King, I will make you save us. Look into my eyes, look into my eyes," and as he snapped his fingers, Chris King went under. "Expand your skinny little chest, Chris King, like a super boy and break the ropes."

"How? How do I do it? These ropes are as tight as Dick's hat band!"

"Just breathe in and out," Palean instructed, "slowly at first, now more and more air, now faster..."

Chris King took in a mighty gulp of air, and then his chest exploded outwards, bursting the hemp ropes with a loud *SNAP!* His satin jersey

was torn to pieces in the process, exposing the green master key around his neck.

Palean snapped his fingers again. "Wake up, Chris King."

"Wow, that really worked," cried Chris King, as he woke. "That's the best possible outcome, for certain!"

"You have powers we don't even know about yet, Chris King."

"How the hell could your puny chest withstand all those tons of pressure?" asked Chris King.

"Perfect harmony!" teased Palean as he mopped the dripping brow of his best pal with a remnant of his jersey.

"I'm overheated, Palean! Let's get upstairs where there's some air."

"Wait!" cried Palean. "I hear someone coming-- let's hide over there and prepare to ambush." Through the door and dressed in black sauntered the unsuspecting Roger Taft. In a flurry of movement, the orphans seized and overpowered the evil-doer. Palean lifted up the squirming boy from behind and held him firmly in his grip.

"Why are you so bad, Roger Taft?" asked Chris King.

"I didn't mean to do anything bad! I promise," the boy wept.

"Your promises mean nothing, you chronological liar!" cried Chris King. "Why did you do all these awful things to us and our friends?"

"Because my mother hypnotized me! Miss Fortune! She went insane with jealousy when I posted your soccer pictures on the walls of my bedroom. Anyone I admired she hated. So she hypnotized me and gave me pills! I can remember it all clearly now. I was like a robot. I even stamped on your chest--"

"That's OK, it didn't hurt, but I would like my St. Christopher medal back, please."

"It's in my pocket!" cried the captive. Releasing the boy from his iron grip, Palean continued to hold him by his shoulders as Roger Taft produced the medal that he had purloined.

"Here it is."

"In case I need a spare," said Chris King, pocketing the charm and smiling at Palean.

"And she beat me!" continued Roger Taft, starting to cry in earnest. "Just look!" He pulled off his shirt to show the many black bruises. "She beat me really hard, harder than a man! And worst of all, she wouldn't let me smoke in the house!" he wailed.

"Wouldn't let you smoke in your own house?" cried Palean.

"How did this happen?" demanded Chris King. "How did we not get hurt when we fell through the floor?" demanded Chris King.

"The whole trap hole is protected by a Peter Clark safety device-- an almost invisible net made of thousands of piano wires. If someone falls, he's caught, then whisked downstage and unloaded. I added my ether gas, and *BANG!* you guys were out like a light! Then I trussed you up, and you remembered nothing. It was all an illusion."

"Well," said Palean after a second, "that's what Professor Zimmer likes-- a rational explanation."

After a moment of deliberation, Chris King spoke. "Roger Taft, bow down. Your crime was being too obedient."

Palean released the boy's shoulders so he could bow.

"Say, 'Yes, sir,'" commanded Chris King, as the boy bowed.

"Yes, sir."

"Say it! Say 'I was too obedient, sir.'"

"I was too obedient, sir."

In a sudden move, Chris King shoved Roger Taft's shoulders and sent him flying backwards onto the cement, flat on his back, slamming his head on the hard floor and sending him into a daze.

Chris King stepped forward and *BLAM!* went his soccer cleat down onto Roger Taft's exposed chest.

"Owwwwwwww!" Roger Taft screamed as tears coursed down his pink cheeks. "Please stop!" he begged.

"How about in your tummy, Roger Taft?"

WHAM! came down the shoe of Chris King square onto the solar plexus of Roger Taft. "Ahhhhhh!" Roger Taft doubled up in agony before he passed out from shock.

"Now YOU'VE hit bottom, Roger Taft, and it's no illusion."

Palean snapped his fingers, and Chris King froze.

"It may or may not be an illusion, Chris King, but we're going back in time now, erasing everything that just happened and giving you the chance to do things differently. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," replied Chris King, again in a trance.

"Now," continued Palean, "I will snap my fingers again, and time will start up again at the precise instant that you said, 'Roger Taft, bow down. Your crime was being too obedient.' Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied Chris King, and as Palean snapped his fingers, time began again.

"Roger Taft, you are forgiven," said Chris King. "The evil hypnotic spell of Miss Fortune is broken."

Roger Taft stood again, in awe and wonder at the kind treatment he had received for his many crimes. "That's mighty white of you, Chris King!"

"Now get out of here, little dude," said Palean to the boy. "I gotta talk to Chris King-- in private," he emphasized. "Go to the dorm and get yourself cleaned up, then we'll meet you back on the stage. And destroy your black clothes!" The newly-initiated boy took the hint and started to leave.

"Hey, hold up a minute," said Palean as an idea popped into his head. "Where can I get pen and ink?"

"There's some right here," replied Roger Taft. "Good!" said Palean, who proceeded to sit down and write.

"Now, Roger Taft, this here's a letter. I want you to mail it to New York City."

"If I hurry, I can get it in the post today!" said the obedient boy.

"No rush, tomorrow morning's fine-- but without fail. And this is a HUGE do not disturb sign. Adhere it the door of my suite! Number thirteen. Can you remember?"

"Yes sir, yes sir!" said Roger Taft as made his exit with all deliberate celerity.

"Good, now we can talk and not be disturbed," said Palean, who was smiling like Dean Martineau, who had appeared at their feet.

"Speak on, oh wise one! Why did you put a sign on your door if you're not in there?" asked Chris King.

"Think about it," continued Palean. "This town of W_____, if that's where we are, is different. This morning we woke up ordinary orphans and this afternoon, both of us have discovered super powers we never knew we had."

"OK," agreed Chris King. "I follow you so far."

"In both cases," said Palean, "as if by instinct, we used our new powers for good-- you saved me and I saved you. So why can't we use our powers for selfish purposes?" he asked, a smile creeping onto his lips.

"Such as?" asked Chris King in eager anticipation.

"You're missing, right?"

"Right," agreed Chris King.

"Then why not play the hook and STAY missing? I need a vacation and so do you! We've been in the weeds for two weeks and I for one would like to get away! Come, come upstairs! Roger Taft should be back soon!" said Palean to the mystified Chris King.

Once the orphans reached the empty stage, Palean continued.

"If these stage sets are real, then so are the woods," said Palean gazing out beyond the house. "Bring in scene eight, Chris King. Let's take a gamble. I'm going to set scene eight on the Hub switchboard."

As Chris King depressed the next button, the trap doors closed tightly, and a woodland scene flew in, to the ethereal strains of the Hansel & Gretel Overture. The afternoon sky vanished, its place taken by a beautiful night sky, and it began to gently rain.

"This music is intoxicating! You are brilliant, Palean Packard the third," said Chris King as he stood close to his best pal.

"You see Chris King, your powers so far are in your body, but mine are up here," said Palean, tapping his head with his finger, "in my mind."

"And you've got a DIRTY mind!" laughed Chris King. "And I just noticed for the first time-- you've got B.E. too!"

In that September moment, Roger Taft appeared, clean and dressed as he was the first time Palean saw him, including beanie.

Chris King put his arm over the shoulder of the newly-redeemed lad and said, "Roger Taft, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful fiendship."

And without further ado, shoulder to shoulder the trio walked through the house, over the bridge, and then they were gone.

CHAPTER XX. THREE DAYS LATER

It was a gray, rainy morning when the professor came rushing up to Palean, who had finally emerged from dressing room thirteen and who stood center upon the stage among the assembled company, complete except for Chris King.

"At last, you've come out of your room!" exclaimed the tenured man. "We've been worried! You didn't eat."

"I don't feel like eating," replied Palean.

"No one's eaten," cried Luke.

"Palean," continued the professor, "it's been three whole days..." ("I know," thought Palean dreamily) "...and still no sign of Chris King, nor a word from Mr. Eastman or the soccer team."

Just then, amidst love and squalor, over the bridge galloped Mr. George Eastman riding his chestnut roan, Foto Finish. Close behind him was his favorite mare, Camera Ready, ridden by none other than the youngest inhabitant, Cheshire Bridge, serving as groom, with his own pony in tow, Uppity End.

"Speak of the friggin' devil!" cried Palean excitedly to the professor, as he rushed down to meet and hug the man from Kodak.

"Mr. Eastman!" said the orphan excitedly. "Do you know what's happened? Did you get the professor's wires?" asked Palean.

"One thing at a time, my boy," said the inventor as he dismounted. "One thing at a time. Cheshire Bridge, take care of these gentle beasts. Around the back," he ordered as the young groom led the horses away.

"I am serving as a sort of advance man, Palean, with a message." Drawing a note from his suit pocket, he read, "Bring in the Triumphant Return Finale setting, the one with all the bunting. Act II Finale."

"But, sir, there are only scene numbers on the control panel," explained Palean to Mr. Eastman.

"Look again!" he commanded, and indeed there was the legend, exactly as he had described it.

"Gee, I never saw that before! I wish I had!" laughed Palean, and as Xemo depressed the button, the bunting-covered scenery flew in nicely. At the Hub switchboard, Kimo executed scene nine, spinning the slow-motion wheel at a fantastic rate. As he did so, the gray skies faded out, the day became bright and sunny, and birds began to sing.

"What is that sound, Professor?" asked Luke.

"An autohorn!" cried the professor.

"It's an autohorn! It's an autohorn," chorused the boys who had never heard one.

"It's the Packard!" exclaimed the bewildered professor. "But how can a car get up here? How did a horse get up here? "

From out of the woods and over the scenic bridge puffed the green 1912 Packard convertible, bearing a driver and two passengers. The touring car motored right down to foot of the stage and stopped, closely followed by the jubilant Kodak Boy Orphans soccer team, attired in dress costumes of green and purple and sparkling in the sunshine. "Thank Goodness we have those extra bedrooms!" thought Palean.

The great Peter Clark stepped out from the car to tumultuous applause.

"It's Mister Peter Clark!" Palean exclaimed at the top of his young smoke-filled lungs. The crowd echoed his greeting at top volume.

"We have found Chris King!" declared the expert of theatre.

"Hooray! Chris King has been found!" crowed the crowd euphorically.

A roughed-up Chris King staggered from the Packard, his face dirty and flushed, his jersey missing, and his trunks in tatters. The green key still hung around his neck and a lit cigarette dangled from his lips.

Palean rushed to his side. "Are you OK, buddy?"

"I feel like I've been knocked into the middle of next week," exhaled Chris King, in his greatest performance since *White Slavery*.

"This IS the middle of next week, dude! You've been missing for three whole days!" exclaimed Palean in mock surprise as he and Peter Clark assisted the lad up to the stage.

"Where did you find him, Mr. Clark?" asked Palean excitedly.

"My office received an anonymous tip in a letter that Chris King was being held captive and forced to do the bidding of a rascally imposter!"

The boys on stage, as well as the professor, listened in rapt attention to this amazing news. And once again, Palean was struck by the similarity of accent between Peter Clark and his best pal.

"And where was he being held?" asked Peter Clark rhetorically. "Right there, in that old windmill! You can see barely see it through the trees," he said, pointing with his cigarette. "If only the tip had come by wire instead of letter-- I could have rescued Chris King three days sooner!"

"Gee, that was a tough break!" replied Palean as he exchanged a furtive grin with Chris King.

"How come your shirt is torn clear off?" asked Kimo.

"Tied to the mill wheel," recounted Chris King, "I escaped a certain drowning death by expanding my chest, bursting the bonds which held me, and in the process my perfunctory jersey was ripped to shreds."

"Say I know a couple of kids back in Cleveland who will love that story!" exclaimed the professor. He and all the boys crowded Chris King to shake his hand and merely to adulate their hero. Palean presented Chris King with a new jersey, who shone like a jewel in the blaze of the two super-bright arc lights which had ignited on cue.

"It seems like a year since 'new jersey'!" laughed Chris King as he donned his costume.

"Well, boys," said the smiling Peter Clark, "you've all done a splendid job. The $1000 reward money goes to Palean Packard!"

"Oh but sir..." began Palean but he was interrupted.

"And there are others who are deserving of a bow," continued the expert of theater. "Behold, the Mann girls and Phoebe! The lost have been found!"

The missing girls, one beautiful and three buzzard-like, entered and formed a line. "Take a bow, girls!" cried Peter Clark. Hardly had they begun to bow when he stopped them. "Or should I say, take a bow, BOYS!"

The girls, as one, removed their wigs and blouses, revealing themselves to be good-looking Irish boys, to the shocked astonishment of the

assembled company. "The girls" took deep bows, greeted by a round of surprised gasps, applause, and cheers.

"Leaping Lizards! Our enemies were actors?" asked Chris King to Palean.

"Phoebe was a guy?" asked poor George, who was in shock.

After the actors' first bow, Peter Clark barked, "About face!" They pivoted 180 degrees and on their green workshirts was embroidered the name of their boss.

"Their shirts say Peter Clark Inc. They're boys from your own shop!" cried Palean, whose mind was reeling. "So all of the unsolved mysteries, the tragedy at Eastman, the radio station, the elevator, the explosion-- they were all merely an illusion?"

"A Peter Clark illusion!" shouted Chris King, who ran to the right side of the great Peter Clark as Palean moved to match him on the left, Peter Clark's long arms embracing them.

"Of New York City," added Palean Packard, as excited as he'd ever been before.

"And the roles of the three young Scandinavian strippers were played by these young ladies from the Kokomo branch of the Earhart Cooking School for Girls," revealed Mr. Clark, and to the "ooohs" and "aaaahs" from the assemblage, a troika of beautiful lasses entered from the wing, exquisitely costumed and brilliantly lit. Kimo, at the Hub switchboard, could hardly keep up with his cues.

"Wow!" cried Allen, Beaver Bither, Gabe, George, Kerry Dutton, Kimo, Luke, Penrod, Peter, Xemo, and the soccer team, almost in unison.

"Then I was wrong, even though I have tenure," wailed the professor. "All along I railed that real life wasn't a show-- but now it turns out it was a show." He began dancing about, exultant and tearful. "It's all a show!" he laughed maniacally, dispensing Kleenex to the entire company.

"Good news about Miss Fortune, boys," chimed in Mr. Eastman. "The police have captured her, and she's safely in prison. Roger Taft has been completely exonerated because he was an innocent dupe, hypnotized by his mother."

"And I bear more glad tidings!" cried Roger Taft, in person, rushing onto the stage and waiving a telegram. His cheeks were glowing and he was quivering with excitement.

"My mother has been executed in the electric chair! At long last, I'm an orphan!" he bellowed at the top of his quavering voice.

Up went the happy cry of "Hooray!" and pandemonium reigned as the screaming and cheering throng digested this wonderful news.

"I want to be an Episcopalian!" cried the professor, dropping to his knees. "This is my apostasy!"

"And the role of the professor has been beautifully played by Kevin McSorley, also from my shop," announced Peter Clark as the professor stood and removed his disguise to reveal a beefy Irish lad. "They didn't tell me I'd have to do no actin' when I joined the Ironworker's union!" laughed Kevin, blushing to the sounds of laughter and applause.

"Come here, Roger Taft," said Palean, and the boy obeyed. "Since you are now an orphan you are deserving of the green key," producing a key and lanyard from his pocket.

"That makes us an even thirteen!" cried Roger Taft.

"And I also have good news," proclaimed Kerry Dutton, waving another telegram that had just been handed him. "I have received a confirming wire that my uncle now owns this building. Our paradise is safe!"

"And I have the best news of all!" boomed Mr. Eastman, looking at Chris King.

"We have run your real father to ground, Chris King, your father who was believed to be missing for all these years..."

The anticipation of the crowd was palpable.

"--and he is none other than... Peter Clark!" The assembled company went wild with cries of joy and amazement.

"Peter Clark!" exclaimed Chris King.

"Chris King!" replied Peter Clark in exactly the same accent.

Then Peter Clark took a step back and faced off with Chris King.

"I saw you last night outside the Biltmore Hotel."

"Yes, sir," replied Chris King automatically. "That's where I live."

"Where?" asked Peter Clark.

"Outside the Biltmore Hotel!" replied the elated Chris King, dancing an Irish jig. "That's our old vaudeville routine! I just remembered! The hypnotic spell is broken! You ARE my dad!"

And amidst loud huzzahs, father and son hugged. "We've found one another just in the nick of time, my son. I have a job for you, for you and Palean and all your boys," smiled Peter Clark. "There's a whole new town to be built out there," he said, pointing past the bridge. "Peter Clark job production number 86----. We open March 14, 1932. Do you think you can be ready?"

"That's the same number that's on the key you gave me!" exclaimed Chris King to Palean. "But seven years to build a..."

"You and I can do anything, dude," replied Palean to his best pal as he put his hand on his shoulder. "So long as we're all together."

"Then it's a deal, Mr. Clark!" announced Chris King, and father and son embraced once again.

"Keep this as a souvenir, boys!" said Peter Clark, handing a copy of the New York *Daily News* to Chris King, who read the banner headline out loud. "13 Hyper-intelligent boys missing. Soccer team and servants gone as well. Atlanta still on fire."

The crowd was wonderfully overwhelmed by the flow of events. "Three cheers for Mr. Peter Clark and Mr. George Eastman!" cried Palean, and all the boys loudly complied.

After the tumult finally died down, George Eastman and Peter Clark climbed down the stairs and got aboard the waiting Packard. "Home, Dobson," commanded Mr. Eastman to the driver, who had been absorbed in a tattered Buster Brown comic, and the two great inventors were driven over the bridge and out of sight amidst a flurry of cheers. The steeds Foto Finish, Camera Ready, and Uppity End remained behind, housewarming gifts from the great Mr. Eastman.

After the incidental players departed the stage, Palean and Chris King joined hands and moved center, surrounded by the key club guys who by now had paired off. Each twin had a Taft, Penrod was with Allen, Xemo with Kimo, Gabe with Peter, and Beaver Bither with Cheshire Bridge, who was happily wearing a slightly used St. Christopher medal.

"Because of your fine work in solving this case, boys," announced Palean, "let's all get highly stoned!" And with the help of a new family-sized rolling bong, they did.

"I've never smoked anything this good!" ejaculated Allen.

"And I have something for you, Palean Packard the third," said Chris King happily. From his pocket came another green key which he held before his co-orphan.

"I stole it from your stuff, so I know it's the last one-- for now," he laughed. And to the boys, Chris King announced, "I present this green key to Palean Packard the third for teaching us photography, camaraderie, and above all, Brenography."

The crowd went crazy as Palean graciously accepted the award. "And I have a surprise for you, Chris King. Your new father, Mr. Peter Clark, is pleased to present each member of the green key club with a grandmother of his very own, eager to dote upon you. They each come equipped with their own old house and plenty of home-cooked meals and secret panels!"

As the soccer team pit orchestra struck up a piano and woodwind arrangement of "Mountain Greenery", thirteen adoring, but not suffocating, grandmothers entered from the wing, just like in a dream and fresh from the beauty parlor.

"They will teach us innocence all over again," said Chris King, as Dean Martineau the cat jumped into his arms.

"Supper is served!" announced the young and beautiful Mary Kitchen as Godfrey Daniel and a team of Irish maids brought in heaping platefuls of salmon croquettes, tomato aspic, and boiled custard.

"To young Mary Kitchen," Chris King cried out, "the mother of us all!"

"A photo opportunity!" commanded Palean, and from across the stage appeared the photographer and his powder boy.

"What an adventure!" cried Chris King.

"With the best possible conclusion!" added Palean.

"Poof!" went the flash powder, and the curtain began to descend.

THE END